著——渡航 (Speakeasy)
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どうでもいい世界なんて2
—クオリディア・コード—
GAGAGA

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Doudemo ii Sekai Nante -Qualidea Code-
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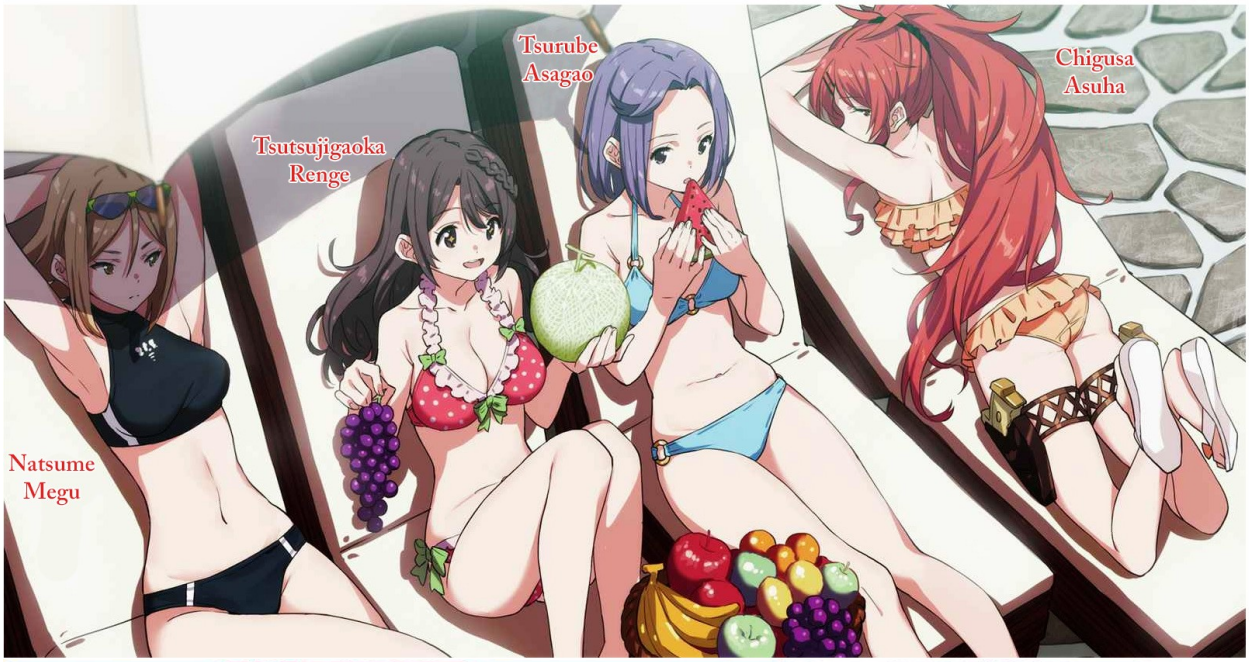
Natsume
Megu
Tsutsujigaoka
Renge
Tsurube
Asagao
Chigusa
Asuha

THE WORLD WAS CHANGING ALL AROUND HER. IN THIS VERY WORLD, THE MANIFESTATION OF THE UNIMAGINABLE BEGAN TO APPEAR.
SAID ASUHA AS SHE PULLED OUT BOTH HER HANDGUNS FROM UNDERNEATH HER SKIRT.
"WELL THEN, I'M OFF."

Chapter 1: To Come Home One Day

The usual morning announcements were replaced by the sound of firing cannons. What a sound to wake up to. “Good morning, Chiba,” I thought to myself.

Outside, a large bridge spanned across Tokyo Bay. An armored train ran across the tracks laid on top of it. Its wheels shrieked as the train ran, and its attached revolving turret made some rustic sounds. Surely, the battle was about to begin. Actually, no… To say it was about to begin was incorrect— the battle had never ended.

The war constantly dragged on. Soldiers fought before I went to sleep, fought as I dreamed, and fought as I woke up. This conflict really had no foreseeable end. It was a conflict where war couldn’t be distinguished from peace, where weapons would never stop being used, and where the chime would ring without knowing who it was for.

The snipers headed towards the battlefield— their war cries echoed with the gunshots. A single voice in the midst of the troops pierced through the explosions. It belonged to the leader, still young in age, and perhaps the sole reason why there were so many girls in the troops. The voice was filled with ambition, but also had a tint of complacency. From the tone of her voice, they probably did not lose the battle. However, they did not win it, either. It was a never-ending war to defend against the capture and recapture of the city and the sea.

The enemies were called the <Unknowns>. They were humanity’s sworn enemies that had long ago driven humans to the brink of destruction. Encounters with these creatures *always* ended up in conflict— there was no compromise. These conflicts were so routine now that they seemed to come out of a game, rather than be rooted in reality.

In fact, only the sounds from the battlefield were realistic. The ammunitions were fired with unique noises that echoed through the air. These sounds were so perfectly orchestrated on the battlefield that if judged from the fundamental sounds alone, then this orchestra would get a full score. However, there were a few reasons why that might not be the case: One was that this battlefield really didn’t need to be orchestrated. Another was that the sounds were all over the place. Most importantly, however, was that the real battlefield wasn’t in the front lines, but rather at the back with the logistics of managing all the weapons and ammunitions.

“Hey…” he said as he tried to get my attention. I looked blankly outside the building. The continuous sounds of phone rings, email notifications, and computers seemed to drown out the noises far off in the distance. “Chigusa, you know…” he added.

I instinctively gave him a dead fish response as my name was being called, and turned towards him. I was standing upright in front of his desk, but he was sitting down in front of me with his arms folded. He had slick black hair

and was sporting rimless glasses. In the background, I could hear the windows clattering because of the wind. There was another source for all the clattering, though. It was not the sound of him using the touchpad as one might imagine, but rather, it was the sound of his foot tapping against the floor. I suppose that this is what's known as the restless leg syndrome.
He kept prodding. "Are you really listening?"
"I really am," I responded, exhausted.
With his thick voice and at this distance, I absolutely had to have heard him. But this boy, Tatsuki Urushibara, simply sighed deeply at my response. He exhaled, and his slender build became even more slender. Looking worried, he adjusted his glasses and raised his eyebrows. As he did, I was able to see the scar above his right eyelid and his nose pretty clearly. From what I could see, his nose didn't look out of place. His face as a whole, actually, was relatively symmetrical. His nose was long, and his almond shaped eyes were clear, though they were a bit cold. However, his twitchy eyes showed his nervousness, so his manliness was toned down a notch.
His fashion sense was relatively good as well. Tight collars popped out of his black jacket, and a gold watch peeked from underneath his sleeve. Equally gold earrings pierced his ears as well. If he were in his tank tops, not only would his biceps show, but also his proud tattoos that were a cut above the rest. He was also the epitome of average heights. In any case, his description was something of that nature. He was smart, yet at the same time, wild. If I had to describe it in a phrase… it would be something like an *educated gangster*.
"Hmm, that's not really true, right?" he said as he shook his head. "You were only listening. But I'm actually asking whether or not you understood what I just said?"
So that was why he looked displeased. Reading between the lines was pretty hard, and I wasn't one for compassion.
"Look, I'm really not saying this just because I want to, you know." Urushibara took off his glasses, and started wiping the lenses with a cotton handkerchief. "Yesterday I told you to report the results of the outer businesses to the section chief, right? Even today you haven't done that at all, Chigusa."
"You were keeping an eye on me, huh…" I responded. Why would he do that? Was he one of my fans? "If you got time to keep track of what I was doing, then do some work yourself!" I thought as I grumbled softly.
Urushibara gave me a sharp look.
"Hahh?" he said, looking confused.
"It's nothing…" I responded quickly. A threat from the *educated gangster* was really scary…
"Why haven't you given your report yet?" he said. "I won't get mad, so tell me."
I felt that whenever people had to say that they wouldn't get mad, they were already plenty mad.

“I did email my report earlier…” I murmured, but he wouldn’t have any of it.
“Well I wouldn’t know about it if you emailed it, right? I never did say to only send it to the section chief. We do things as a team, after all,” he said.
“Why, then? Why just only send it to the section chief? Did you think it was okay not to tell me?”
“I’m sorry…”
He still looked stern. “It’s not like I want you to apologize. I just want you to tell me why, so this doesn’t happen again in the future, okay? Tell me.”
I looked at him, amazed. “Umm… I mean I did cc you in that email…”
“No excuses!” he shouted.
The hell was he talking about? I responded with my reason just like he had asked, but he continued to scold me.
“Why won’t you just take responsibility for your mistakes?” He snapped at me. “Just apologize and reflect a bit and I’d be fine with it.”
What the hell? Didn’t he say earlier that he didn’t want an apology? Wow, this guy… Not only were his words usually different than his actions, but right now what he said was different than what he meant. Well, this did happen from time to time, so I couldn’t let it get to me. I needed to be more of a smartass, I think. Like if I was asked, “Is the food ready yet?” I would respond with a smile and say, “Wow, you already ate last month and you want to eat even more now? You pig!” In other words, I needed to give off a snarkier impression. If I only had this kind of spirit, things would have been quite different.
“In any case, I don’t remember seeing such an email…” he said as he fidgeted with his antique computer. He took off his glasses and blinked two, no three times. He then put his glasses back on with a really unpleasant look and sighed deeply, perhaps just for show. “I mean, since you were so close, why didn’t you just tell me directly? Did you not think that maybe I could have overlooked the email? Haven’t you learned the proper way to report and consult? We move as a team, so communication is a must. Am I wrong? Do I make sense?”
I couldn’t answer— he was indeed making sense. A person like him making sense… now that was a bit strange.
“Are you listening, Chigusa?” He was still making a big fuss. He loosened his already loosened necktie even more and cracked his neck.
Wait a second, I thought. This can’t be happening. Last time I reported it to him directly, Urushibara forgot about it completely, and we ended up in an endless debate of whether or not I reported it. That’s why *this* time I sent it by email… after all, he was the one who ordered me to do it this way!
My thought process was interrupted after he hit his desk with a bang and shouted, “Chigusa! Chigusa Kasumi!”
“Yes, I’m listening, I’m listening,” I listlessly responded.
“Then, why didn’t you respond to me? I asked whether I was making any sense, right? It would then be proper to respond, wouldn’t it?”

Yes. I understand. Roger that. Acknowledged. Certainly. Will do… No matter what I responded with, it'd be the same thing. Urushibara would keep at it until I answered in a way he deemed acceptable. That's why it's the same whether I answer or not.
"Yes," I finally ended up saying. Even knowing all that, I answered anyway, out of courtesy. There's be a meeting elsewhere this evening, so I wanted him to finish up quickly. Urushibara, however, seemed to want to talk to me even more.
"Please. It's already been half a year since you came to the manufacturing branch, right?"
"Yeah," I said, but in my view, it's been *only* half a year.
"I don't know how they did it in the military branch, but the way you do things now is unacceptable," he continued.
"Um, but I wasn't even active in the military…"
He looked unfazed. "Well, that's no surprise. You probably dropped out early, huh," he said as he sighed heavily again. He shook his head and gave a *tsk*. "In any case, since you are in *our* branch, you need to do things *our* way."
So he says, but I don't recall even being told how they do things here. Thanks to this mysterious system called OJT (On the Job Training), I was thrown into the workplace without an ounce of training. They assigned me to Urushibara, who, instead of teaching me anything, told me to learn by watching what others did. Despite Urushibara only saying things like, "Don't think, feel!" I would somehow manage to complete my work. He would also make me stand at attention in front of his desk and scold me harshly, but I got used to that long ago.
Because of that, this became a very common sight around here. No one really cared at all, though. Even now as things heated up, no one really paid us any attention. The office continued to be filled with the sounds of phone rings and email notifications. Every so often, the schoolgirls working at their desks would go, "……. Hah… *tsk.*" They would repeatedly press their keyboards with a *click clack*, then sigh and smack their lips together repeatedly.
"My apologies. I'll manage until the scheduled delivery. Yes, my apologies. I'm doing my best. No, it's my bad. I'll manage somehow. Yes, yes, I'm sorry," said the boys. They seemed to have it rough, since they were holding their stomachs and wiping their already sweaty foreheads.
Suddenly, I heard another voice. "The person in charge on your end said it couldn't be done, but if you'd hear me out, that's a lie. Even if he says it can't be done, just do it. And once you've completed it, it's not impossible anymore, right? In other words, he's lying," he said, grinning. I bet he thought he said something extremely thought out. After all, he would often say things in that way to me as well. He looked old, and if I remembered correctly, his name was Watami.

Everyone was frantically doing their own work that nobody seemed interested in me being scolded at the corner of the office. *Ughh*… Looks like nobody's coming to get me out of this. Rather, I thought maybe I should be the one helping others, as this workplace desperately needed some assistance.
In fact, the ones who needed the most assistance were probably the few people who seemed out of place in this kind of environment. This girl, bringing in some tea right now on a tray, was one such person. She probably made some tea for both me and Urushibara to help soften the tension between us. After all, she did look quite worried while she listened to Urushibara talk. She nervously walked as if she had lost her bearings.
"U-Umm…" she said nervously as she called out to Urushibara, approaching him.
"What is it??!?" snapped Urushibara as he turned around. But when he saw who it was, he relaxed his stern face. "… Ah, it's just you, Renge," he said so pleasantly that it starkly contrasted with his strict demeanor earlier.
Renge… Tsutsujigaoka Renga. She was my age, 16 years old. She had big pupils and flexibly stretched out her arms and legs like a little girl. She wore knee high socks that wrapped around her toned legs. Within all the Chiba students, there were a lot of people who lazily wore their designated uniforms, but Tsutsujigaoka wore hers stylishly. The front of the jacket was closed up, and her ribbon tie was tightly tied up. And even with all that, she wasn't overly stiff or formal. Perhaps that was due to her constantly soft and gentle demeanor. Her slightly teary but wide opened eyes wavered for a split second. Her pale skin looked as if it were transparent. Her lips, never having lost her smile, had the color of blooming cherry blossoms. She had long and black hair that ran down her face, and it looked soft to the touch.
Urushibara smiled and continued. "What's up? Is there anything you don't understand, Renge? It's only been half a year since you came here, so if there's anything you need help on, let me know!"
I've only been here half a year too, so I too wanted to ask about things I don't know… Tsutsujigaoka and I both came from the military branch at the same time, but why was I the only one being treated so harshly? If I was the one who went up to ask, he would answer, "Why can't you think about it yourself? Do you always need to rely on others?" But, if I didn't ask about things, he would then say, "Why didn't you ask me about it? Did you think you can do it without asking me?" It was pretty much a lose-lose situation for me. Most of the times it was pretty obvious why I came to him too…
Well, the reason for this divide was pretty clear cut: Tsutsujigaoka was a girl. A pretty reserved girl, but a cute girl, nevertheless. On the other hand, it would actually be bad if he wasn't mean to me. If Urushibara was nicer to me than he was to Tsutsujigaoka, then I would think he would be trying to manipulate me. With that in mind, I'm actually kind of okay that he treats me pretty harshly… But wait a second… I have to be careful… If he's

suddenly nice to me, then he's probably up to something. I can't let my guard down.
I caught myself— all these thoughts just seemed unnecessary. Urushibara was not a manipulative person, he was just an asshole. Most people who are labelled manipulative are just assholes in the end. He did give off the, "Hahaha! Alright, Papa will teach you anything! Haha!" vibe as well.
He turned his chair around rapidly and cheerfully said, "Please let me know whenever you are in trouble." He smiled at Tsutsujigaoka.
"Ah, umm, sorry! About the business report earlier…" she said.
Urushibara gave a smug smile and responded, "Oh, about that. That was actually all on Chigusa here. I'm still telling him all about it now, about how to not do things through email. I'm nice enough to help him change his ways, haha."
He was pretty much saying, "Yeeesh, what a pain."
Tsutsujigaoka teared up in response and muttered, "Umm, I'm so sorry. I also did things through email…"
"Oh. I see…" Urushibara said as he looked at Tsutsujigaoka. She looked as if she was about to cry. Urushibara also got a bit quiet even after all the things he flamboyantly said earlier. But, as expected of Urushibara, he quickly responded with a nod. "Yes, yes, I understand," he seemed to say.
"Well, it's certainly important to have a record of things rather than a he said she said scenario. So, thanks for that, Renge."
It was painfully clear what he was doing. In fact, his kindness was actually disgusting.
"I'll be careful next time. Sorry!" responded Tsutsujigaoka as she quickly bowed her head. As a result, she almost spilled the tea she was holding. To prevent that from happening, she tried to balance herself as she took a few steps.
Ah! Aah! Ooh! Ahh! Hahh! Hahwah!
She tried her best, but her best wasn't good enough. In the end she was unable to balance herself. She made some awkward noises and fumbled over, spilling the tea all over herself. She cried out in a daze, "Oww… Oh what!?!" The front of her school uniform and the hem of her skirt got all messed up. Her tea soaked blouse clung on to her skin, and once she noticed that it was starting to turn transparent, she quickly tried to adjust it. But, everyone in the office had stopped what they were doing and silently turned towards Tsutsujigaoka. Then, all at once, they all burst out laughing.
"…Looking good."
"That's actually perfect."
"Renge is such a klutz, isn't she."
Illustration
The boys were laughing so hard that their stomachs hurt. Watami started the wave of thanks, and Urushibara reached out to her with a smile. The girls who were typing so rigorously earlier stopped and looked over at her. They gave a look that mirrored the way people would look when their

daughter or sister messed up, a look of “Ah, there’s no helping it, isn’t there?” They came over to her with a cloth to help clean things up.
“Seriously, Tsutsujigaoka… look at the mess…” said the girls, who were almost *too* helpful as they helped her clean up.
Tsutsujigaoka was totally flustered. “Sorry! I’m so sorry!”
There was a battle going on far off in the bay, but this was quite the heartwarming sight to see. Even in this depressing workplace, Tsutsujigaoka was one of the few people who could make us laugh like that; she was like an angel. But, if something trivial like this cheered us all up, perhaps this workplace wasn’t as depressing as I thought. Speaking of which, why was this workplace depressing in the first place? Was it because we were forced to work and get along together?
I continued my thoughts, but I suddenly heard the sound of footsteps coming my way. The pace didn’t sound particularly large, so it must have been someone small. From the sound alone, I assumed this person was also quite restless.
With a bam, the door was flung open and a little girl appeared in the doorway. In her hand were things like a tablet, binder, clear file, and other such materials. Her imposing stance actually felt quite dangerous as she shouted, “You guys are too noisy! School is still going on!”
“T-Tsurube. How are you doing?” Urushibara responded immediately, as if he was used to it. He smiled nervously and rubbed his hands together. His demeanor changed so much that he definitely was not the same person who had scolded me earlier. I couldn’t believe this is how he acted — it seemed like he couldn’t go against her at all. It is said that the weak are sometimes strong, and the strong are sometimes weak. Even if Urushibara was strong at times, he certainly wasn’t at this moment.
“Don’t call me Tsurube. It’s Asagao,” she said, scowling at him.
Urushibara was at a loss for words. He quite cleverly avoided looking in her eye.
Tsurube Asagao also seemed quite clever. She had smooth and pale skin. Her small eyes, nose, ears, and mouth complimented her small build well. Her front bangs didn’t cover her smooth forehead, and her arms and legs stretched out like a fawn’s. At a glance, she looked quite childish and immature, and seemed as fickle as the wind. I mean, she was 16 years old, like me, but she looked much younger. However, her strong gaze reflected upon her unyielding spirit. Just from a glance, you could see traces of her inner strength, and she showed maturity far greater than her actual age. Urushibara even looked up to her!
“This time of year is really damn busy, so what are you guys doing? I’m sure you guys know this, but if you don’t finish up your work, there will be consequences,” she warned, and the lighthearted mood of the office turned heavy and dull. “Human resources will rate you lower.”
Tsurube Asagao was the only one able to speak about this rating from human resources, and just by mentioning it, everyone reacted nervously.

Indeed, Tsurube Asago was the boss of this manufacturing branch. In middle school, she successfully developed a product that increased the value of the department significantly. She also singlehandedly opened up trade routes to the inner and other cities. With this, she was able to build up a solid reputation for herself. Soon thereafter, she became the youngest ever leader in South Kanto's City's provisioning management group as the head of the manufacturing branch.
She may be small physically, but she was headstrong and cunning in management.
She stood at the top, a prodigy that produced amazing results through her hard work. Her refusal to compromise with anyone made this branch the toughest to work in. She exercised absolute control: she was the demon king and the workplace was her realm.
This demon king glared at the angel.
"Renge… again?" she said, disgruntled. Her wrinkles began to show.
"I-I'm sorry…" Tsutsujigaoka responded, frantically wiping the floor with the cloth. She looked so scared as she kept on apologizing.
In response, Tsurube Asagao rubbed her own forehead as if to help alleviate the headache caused from all this. The surrounding people just stared on with their mouths open in suspense, until Tsurube finally broke the silence with a sigh. She reluctantly said, "Well, it can't be helped, huh?" The corners of her lips seemed to make out traces a smile— it was clear that she wasn't too angry. Tsutsujigaoka and I, along with everyone else, breathed a sigh of relief.
Tsutsujigaoka pumped up a fist. "I'm sorry, Asagao. I'll learn this up quickly! A-After, I'll remake the tea!"
Tsurube laughed lightheartedly. "How about no for the tea. If you spill it again it'll be more troublesome," she responded.
"I-It'll be okay! I'll bring it in a bottle!" Tsutsujigaoka said, reassuring. They sounded like two close classmates talking to each other.
"By the way, can you get me a cup? A paper cup, not my favorite one."
"Sure, I got it! Wait, why? I won't break your favorite cup, I promise."
"You sure?" She looked at Urushibara. "What'd you think?"
"Hahaha, I guarantee she'll break it," said Urushibara cheerfully. "The other day she broke my cup into a billion pieces."
Tsurube smiled, and the other people also smiled and laughed. I myself unintentionally grinned a little. *Ahahaha*, Urushibara's cup was broken all this time, huh? It'd be great if his cold front was also broken more often.
In the midst of this, Tsutsujigaoka, her face still red from embarrassment, nodded. While looking at her calmly, Tsurube clapped her hands together and said, "Alright everyone, back to work. After you finish cleaning up, Renge, come with Urushibara to the meeting room. I need to ask things about your team for some evaluations."
"O-Okay!" responded Tsutsujigaoka as she nodded.

She then looked in my direction. “Chigusa… you too as well,” she said softly as she left for the meeting room without so much as to wait for my response.

Tsurube sat down in front of me, tapping her nails on the tablet. A paper cup was placed on the table, with four seats laid around it. After carefully pouring the tea from the bottle, Tsutsujigaoka, looking satisfied, breathed deeply and sat in her seat.
“Well then, let’s begin,” Tsurube said as she reached out and took a sip. “I have a lot of things I want to ask regarding the evaluation.” She tapped on her tablet a bit, and the screen showed something similar to a paper document. Then she started writing something with the stylus.
Tsutsujigaoka sat beside me. “I-I’ll do my best to answer,” she said nervously.
“Me too,” I said as I bowed my head.
Tsutsujigaoka and I transferred from the military branch. As such, our big boss was Tsurube, so our end-of-term reviews were handled by her. Damn, I’m a little nervous… In the military branch, all that mattered was how many enemies we took down. There was nothing even remotely similar to an interview, so doing this was a first for me. Well, it’s expected, I suppose. In the military, we spoke using our fists, not our words.
Tsurube laughed bitterly. “Don’t be that stiff, come on,” she said, noticing our nervousness. “I already received your reports, and nothing was really that significant.”
“… So you’re saying you make decisions based solely on the reports?” I asked. If that was true, it’d be really troublesome. Since I was suddenly transferred this term, I wasn’t doing anything important. At most, I would meet with clients and hear their complaints about our branch. I really didn’t do a lot, so it’s inevitable that my review would go badly.
Tsurube looked puzzled.
“Chigusa… why are you even talking like that?” said Urushibara. He was sitting next to Tsurube. “Show some respect! Straighten up your behavior! Your evaluation’s going down, you know.”
“Ah, I should speak more respectfully too… Sorry, Asagao,” Tsutsujigaoka said. “No wait, Asagao-senpai? Or should I say Tsurube-senpai?”
Tsurube fidgeted with her front bangs. “Don’t call me Tsurube…” she vehemently replied. In an instant, her smooth forehead was hidden behind the bangs. “You really don’t have to be so formal with me. I’m the same year as Chigusa, and Renge is a friend. In the first place, this department is results orientated, so if you can bring back some good results, there will absolutely be no problem with anything else.”
“Exactly!” said Urushibara. “You see, Chigusa? In this world, results are everything. Unlike the military branch, it is not based on seniority here. This is an open workplace, after all.”

The moment Tsurube said something, Urushibara would nod nonchalantly and agree with her. He flip-flops on things so much… But, even if this place was results orientated, whenever I went home earlier than Urushibara, he'd keep pestering me on why I was leaving so early… This place might also be too open, I think… Also, Tsurube just nonchalantly implied that I wasn't her friend… Well, that wasn't wrong, so I guess it's okay.
"Well, results are everything, but for this term I really didn't take that into account," said Tsurube. "Renge and Chigusa, it seems you both were still training for this past half year. That's why I'm only here to ask you a few questions."
"I-I see. Thank goodness…" said Tsutsujigaoka, who grasped both her hands together, relieved. In return, Tsurube gave her a slight smile.
Tsurube continued asking her questions. "How's the work environment? Gotten used to everything?"
"Yup! All the upperclassmen are nice, not to mention it's pretty fun too," replied Tsutsujigaoka.
"I see, that's great then. Chigusa how about you? Your old branch ranked based on order of enrollment, but isn't this system much more comfortable for you?" she asked teasingly.
Without thinking, I laughed sarcastically. "Hahaha, sure…" I said softly. Was this forehead girl serious? It's true that when I was in the military branch, I was ashamed for not having achieved anything significant, but I felt exactly the same here. At any rate, this manufacturing branch was different than the military one since I had to work with other branches and cities. Thanks to that, I had to deal with troublesome things no matter where I went.
In these past few years, due to this forehead girl actively participating in the branch, the number of requests that they were able to take on greatly increased. They no longer just supplied food and other things to the military, but now they were in charge of manufacturing brand name vegetables, high quality fruits, and other luxury items. They were able to sell more and more things to more and more clients. As a result, their profits skyrocketed, but the amount of complaints also increased. While there were complaints about the product and the distribution of said product, there were also complaints about problems regarding the other branches and cities trying to cut into the profits.
It felt a bit weird to have the department in a state of constantly developing new things while advancing the old things. It was certainly fast paced.
"Well, I don't know about comfortable," I said with a slight tint of dissatisfaction. "There's a lot of work to be done on the outside, but not a lot of workplaces. Well, compared to the military branch, I do feel like I'm working more, I think…" In fact, I *only* feel like I'm working here. I'm definitely working too much here actually— it was tough working every day until dark.

Tsurube grinned smugly. She seemed to be making fun of me as she said, "That's right. That's right. This is work actually worth doing, right?"
"You sure are blunt, huh…" I replied. It's irrational to think that you don't need a salary, but just some thanks, if the work was something you enjoyed doing. Occasionally, however, there were people who respected that belief. Thankfully though, that belief was only mostly held by the old and depressing companies of the past.
"Well, as for me, I really wasn't that useful in the military branch," said Tsutsujigaoka, embarrassingly. "But here, I'm happy to be useful to everyone!"
"That's right! You are useful!" Tsurube said as she nodded. "Our work here contributes the most to this world! You could even say that we are the foundation for this company! With us gone, technological developments are gone as well." With a clank, she stood straight up and made a fist.
"She's really getting fired up…" I said.
"Asagao is very diligent, after all," responded Tsutsujigaoka. Her response threw me off a little bit. She says it's diligence, but isn't it more like religious fanaticism? It should be fine though, I think…
Tsurube swung her arms out to give her speech more impact. "Chiba's way of producing food is the best! Chiba itself is the foundation for this world! The food storage in this city is not only the lifeline for us in the South Kanto region's third city, but for everyone in the country as well! We have awesome biotech research! Our branch is the best that Chiba has to offer! Kanagawa only has muscle-heads that only produce weapons. The central parliament in Tokyo only has brainless and cocky members. Neither are on the same level as us!" she stated. She exhaled deeply, and her forehead gave off a flash of light.
Tsutsujigaoka applauded with a smile. Urushibara was moved to tears by her words. He wiped the corners of his eyes. However, for me, listening to all that didn't really make me think, "Wow, Chiba is that amazing? As expected of Chiba!" Though being really into your hometown isn't such a bad thing. *Hmm, yeah.* I will applaud to that.
Tsurube cleared her throat a few times and continued. "In any case, I hope all of us have this passion and spirit for the work we do. Hmm, is there anything else we need to discuss?" She was probably embarrassed from our applause. In an effort to hide it, Tsurube fidgeted with the tablet a little bit and changed the screen. I glanced at the screen and saw something that resembled a checklist.
"Compliance check, huh," whispered Tsurube. She was talking to herself.
Tsutsujigaoka twisted her ahead a little bit. "Com- what?" she asked. It was clear she had not heard the word before.
Tsurube used the tablet as she explained. "Basically it's just to make sure you didn't break any school rules. Also there are things like whether the work environment is normal, or whether management is adequate. We also have to check up on you a bit, and make sure you aren't being harassed or

something like that. These are the checks mandated by the school, and we have to comply with it."
She looked down at the tablet. "Okay, okay, okay, umm. Man, some of these things ask for too much… How are we supposed to work with this?" She was reading the list and checking off items.
"Aren't we supposed to fill that out ourselves and turn it in?" I asked, feeling a bit uneasy about what she just said.
She looked at me blankly and tilted her head. "Huh? Well in the end you have to get it checked by me, so isn't it the same thing?" she said. She was cute, but doing it this way had to have violated some rules.
This is *my* boss, huh… I shivered at the thought.
"Alright I'll ask this just in case…" Tsurube cleared her throat and read the final items out loud. Perhaps she got a bit uncomfortable doing it herself after what I've said. "Is there any sort of power harassment in the workplace?"
"None, right? There is none," Urushibara said as he turned towards me and Tsutsujigaoka.
"Why did Urushibara answer that…" I quickly interjected. "Wait, if you are trying to force an answer out… isn't *that* power harassment?" I showed my displeasure. Besides, I don't think asking "just in case" would change anything.
With a stroke of her finger, Tsurube checked the box. "Nice that there is no power harassment, right?" she said, ignoring me.
"It sure is, right?" added Urushibara.
I'm getting pressured by Urushibara again. "That's… um.. that's power harassment…" I timidly said in the face of Urushibara, the *educated gangster.* Off to the side, Tsurube was nonchalantly hitting the sides of her lips with a pen.
"No, I want you to just confirm it," she said.
Urushibara responded almost immediately. "Confirmed."
Oh? So it was going to be like that? Somehow I couldn't agree to this.
Tsurube tilted her head in an effort to convince me again. She raised her brow and said, "Chigusa. For a boy you sure are attentive to things."
"Saying stuff like that is sexual harassment, right?" I asked.
"It really isn't," she replied. "I'm just pointing out things that people have brought; everything I say links to my thought."
"That's some nice rhyming," noted Urushibara.
There's really nothing more I could say— everything seemed futile. You had to just go with what the boss said. Even if something was black, if the boss said that it was white, then you had to accept that it was white. If the boss said that power harassment and sexual harassment were accepted avenues of communication, then they were accepted avenues of communication.
Tsurube let out another sigh. "Alright… It's finished. Sign here please," she said with her head down. She handed me the pen and tablet; it seemed she

really wanted to get this over with. I reluctantly signed it, and passed it off to Tsutsujigaoka. She too started to sign it.
“Afterwards, I need a signature from Natsume too,” she added.
I was a bit surprised to hear such an unexpected name. “Natsume… Natsume from the military branch?” I asked.
“There can only be one person with that name, right? The city’s subhead, Natsume Megu,” Urushibara said as he frowned and nodded. Tsurube had the same expression as well. They both seemed to be in a bad mood from hearing that name.
“Yeah, I guess so…” I replied. Urushibara’s right. Right now, there was only one person that’s named Natsume, Natsume Megu. She was the strongest person in Chiba at the moment… truly the best of the best. The previous head had moved inland, so right now Natsume was technically the head of the Chiba military.
“Since you guys transferred from the military branch, Natsume is technically your supervisor for now,” said Tsurube. “These documents I’m holding also need to be signed by her.”
Tsutsujigaoka raised her head. “I see~ Asagao, you sure are diligent about this,” she said. She finally finished signing.
“Not really,” said Tsurube, shaking her head. “That’s not the real reason.”
Tsutsujigaoka was confused. “Eh?” she asked.
“… Natsume isn’t too bright, so I need to make her do this and show her how troublesome this is,” Tsurube explained. “Otherwise we’ll keep getting more and more people transferring in. Since Natsume isn’t too bright.”
“You said that twice…” I piped in. Tsutsujigaoka laughed nervously.
It seemed Tsurube was no stranger to Natsume. I’m guessing they weren’t too close to each other. She seemed to know her enough to say all those bad things, though.
“After this, you guys have a meeting in the military branch right?” said Tsurube. She pushed her chair and stood up. “I’ll go with you guys to get this signed.”
“Wouldn’t it be easier to just send it as an email?” I asked. “You don’t have to go in person, and everything here is computerized anyway.”
“You think those military brutes can do that?” said Tsurube wearily. “Besides, those people probably don’t read emails anyway.”
Urushibara nodded in agreement. I actually agreed. Even Urushibara doesn’t read his emails, and he’s not in the military branch. The world always converged on the lowest denominator— people have all these great technology and yet they only use what’s familiar to them.
Urushibara stood up from his seat and said, “Then, let’s go soon, yeah? It’s a pretty good time to.” He glanced at his watch— it was close to 5 pm. It was almost time for the meeting.
Urushibara walked out of the room. The rest of us followed him out one by one.
—

After returning to my desk, I quickly made preparations to go out for the meeting. Before leaving the office, I stood in front of the whiteboard on the wall. I took a pen that had a sponge tip on the cap and wrote, “Meeting with military; not returning” on the whiteboard. As I did, someone tapped me on the shoulder. It was Tsurube with her hand out.
“Let me borrow the pen too,” she said.
“Sure,” I replied, passing the pen to her. She took the sponge cap off, and erased my “not returning” portion.
“Wait a second. What are you doing, Tsurube?” I said. For real though, what was she doing? Tsurube put both hands behind her and turned around.
“Don’t call me Tsurube,” she said, grinning. She then winked at me. “Even if you go home, you still have work to do, right?”
I lost my train of thought. “U-Uhh…” I muttered as I stood in front of that cute and wonderful smile. I didn’t know what to say.
After a few moments of silence, she whispered in my ear. “Once the next term settles in, there’ll the city head elections. This is no time to slack off.”
“But we don’t have anything to do with the elections, though…” I said, dejected.
The city head elections were just that- there would be elections to decide the next head for the City of Defense, Chiba. Since the main focus of the city was defense, all past city heads have been from the military branch. In addition to that, everyone expected Natsume Megu, the current subhead, to become the next head. After all, the military branch usually converged on one candidate. The other branches in the city then always followed that candidate as well. All in all, that’s pretty much how we did elections.
“We do! We have lots and lots and lots to do with the election!” shouted Tsurube, snickering with her chest puffed up.
“Yeah, just like we have lots and lots *of work* to do…” I murmured in response. Even though she was speaking with such conviction, I sort of tuned her out.
“Huh? What are you saying?” she said. That’s what I wanted to know…
“In any case, our futures depend on this election,” she continued. “We have to give it our 100%, get more results, and show them what’s up!” she said as she turned around to everyone in the office. “Listen up everyone! Those who fall behind get overtime! Those who succeed are promoted! You get to do bigger and better things once you get promoted!”
“So you mean my workload increased, huh…” I said dishearteningly, looking depressed. But, my voice was quickly drowned out by my coworkers going, “Hell yeah!”
I gazed at them. They were so pumped up. Their fiery eyes were lit, and they were even tearing up as they smiled.
This was indeed where I worked.
This place, where everyone had the spirit and drive to work towards their dream, made for a cozy atmosphere where people couldn’t resist smiling. It

was the South Kanto’s City of Defense -Chiba’s- manufacturing branch’s research and development team.
This was indeed where I fought.

Chapter 2: Resignation

The wind blew fiercely on me.

In Tokyo Bay, especially in the Chiba area, there weren't a lot of places that provided shelter from it. Everything was reduced to debris, so the wind flew freely upon the lands. In fact, some of the debris had been further reduced to mere pebbles. Thanks to that, the manufacturing branch office, a small but tall building inland of the bay, stood in plain view of the sea.

Around thirty years ago, that very place was known as the new urban center, where multi-storied buildings and large-scale event facilities once stood. Businesses in the city had flourished, and the city itself had been quite active. Back in the day, one could have easily guessed that this new urban center was expected to become the next capital just by hearing people talk about it. Well, even if it wasn't technically the capital yet, many considered it to be one. When talking about it, that forehead girl, Tsurube Asagao, would probably say something like: *As expected of my Chiba… Staying superior even from way back. Chiba was always at the top, truly the best!* However, the glory of Chiba, and even the world itself, had long since crumbled away.

It was all due to the war. Radiation, intense blazes, blood, and corpses—everything imaginable came raining down, and the coastline began to change. The bay started to protrude more and more inland until many places eventually ended up beneath the sea. It is said that in the rubble underneath the sea, the relics of human history lie dormant.

The accomplishments of humanity were burned away in the crimson flames, and the memories of them were reduced to mere pieces of dust, only to be blown away by the same wind I currently felt.

Eventually, when this nightmare was finally over, the <World> awoke. Right before the war began, the technology for "cold sleeping" was developed. Children were put into a hibernation-like sleep and stowed away. Those children would soon become the boys and girls we are today.

Twenty years ago, humanity suffered great losses but temporarily won the war. The unknown enemies, cleverly dubbed <Unknowns>, were repelled away, and humanity arbitrarily declared that the war was over. A period of false peace soon followed. However, humanity did not know whether or not the <Unknowns> acknowledged this peace. They were unable to communicate with them, much less achieve mutual understanding with each other.

Although we didn't know much of what happened during the period that followed, except from some hearsay, the fact that there were still battles to this day meant the war was definitely not over.

So, that's why we're here. The defense cities of Tokyo, Kanagawa, and Chiba were built by the temporary government in order to enclose the Tokyo Bay, where most of the <Unknowns> had appeared. And the ones

who fought there -who *could* fight there- consisted only of the boys and girls who had woken up from the cold sleep.
A side effect of going into this cold sleep was the manifestation of supernatural powers. These supernatural powers, called the <Worlds>, saved humanity from their inevitable destruction. They included pyrokinesis, telekinesis, telepathy, flight, and even supernatural strength.
At the same time, there were also powers that had nothing to do with the battlefield. For example, there were some with the ability to brew delicious coffee, instantly know how much change they needed when shopping, or know tomorrow's weather. In other words, <Worlds> also included some useless abilities.
People who possessed these useless <Worlds> capitalized on their skills in non-military branches, and they too helped build the foundation for humanity's continued existence. Unfortunately, they were like replaceable cogs, or even the lubricating oil for those cogs that were used and thrown away. Without having the chance to use their abilities to the fullest, they continued to support the never-ending war from the back lines.
I was one of those replaceable cogs. As a single cog in the system, as the horse pulling the carriage, I continued to work every day.
Before meeting with the military branch, I waited for Urushibara to arrive in the company van. I gazed out at the sea while I waited.
The seagulls cried out far in the distance. Catching sight of any animals in the city was pretty rare. The defense city of Chiba was home to many food manufacturing plants and held the food for pretty much all of the South Kanto region. Consequently, sanitary conditions were strictly enforced, and in general, animals were not allowed inside the city. To register a pet, people had to fill out numerous application forms, and the pets were required to pass medical inspections. Since the process was extremely troublesome, most people didn't bother with it.
The seagulls cried out in unison, and I gently listened to them. All of a sudden, however, I heard some footsteps from behind me.
I heard a voice saying, "It's been a while since I've met with Natsume…"
"Me too," I replied without turning around. "Haven't met her since she told me I was transferring out."
I didn't have to look to see who it was. There weren't a lot of people who called out to me in such a kind voice, especially outside. But, it wasn't as if she was an angel calmly swooping down to save me from the depths of hell. I figured she wasn't even particularly interested in holding a conversation with me.
"Though, that time shouldn't have even counted as a meeting," I added on.
Tsutsujigaoka Renge walked up until she was side by side with me, firmly stepping on the grass underneath us. "Haha, I guess you could say that," she said in an extremely self-deprecating voice. "From the time we were in the military branch, we've been low rankers in some non-essential groups."

In response, I turned my gaze towards her— she tried to brush it off with a smile. Her long hair swayed with the wind, and her black hair glistened as it gently reflected the glow of the sunset. It was as if she had a halo, and without thinking I averted my eyes… I don't like angels. They were unconventionally beautiful and phenomenally amazing without a hint of despair in them.

I recalled some words being said to me long ago: I'm your angel, Kasumi. Got it? Until you can hear my voice, no matter what happens, do not move, okay? Just like the kings and prophets, my words are absolute!

The sky was the very definition of red itself. The sunset was repulsively beautiful, as its very beauty seemed ominous. In contrast, her dark, black hair seemed to be like the night sky spreading its wings. Even now, her cheeks were tinted with the afterglow of the sky. Her hair seemed to fade away into the night, with the color similar to that of a raven. With this, she had the light in front and the darkness behind, so she stood right in the middle of these two extremities. She was like a different being, not bearing the slightest resemblance to anything, and looked as if reality was mixed with illusion.

Though, the person from my memories did not have her smile.

"By the way, thanks," said Tsutsujigaoka.

I shook my head a little bit and looked at Tsutsujigaoka once again. "For what?" I asked. This time I looked at her completely, without glancing away. She tensed up and let out a nervous laugh. "I feel you are always looking out for me, always sticking up for me. It's a bit shameful to be a transfer too, right?"

"Is it?" I questioned. Well, I was no doubt shameful myself.

But, I think compared to me, Tsutsujigaoka was better off as a transfer. She wasn't getting threatened constantly by Urushibara, the other girls looked out for her, and she's friends with our boss, Tsurube Asagao. Watami treats her nicely as well, without showing her his bad side. With that being said though, it seemed like Tsutsujigaoka didn't think that way.

"It really is," she said depressingly as she looked downwards. "Everyone's saying all sorts of things."

I wondered who she was referring to. It could be the people from the manufacturing branch, or other branches as well. It could even be the people from the military.

The military branch was by far the most disconnected out of all the branches, as they were an elite group that only allowed in a certain percentage of people from the overall population. They exercised distinct power and authority with their utterly violent weapons. People felt all sorts of things about them— jealousy, envy, good will, fear, terror and hatred were all but a small portion of those feelings.

That branch was a completely different beast compared to the rest. They alone stood at the top, and they alone flaunted their successes. That's why they interacted only with each other and held contempt for others. On the

other hand, the other branches were mere plebeians. They together stood at the bottom. They were jealous of the military, feared their might, and revered them.
I've always wondered which place was best suited for the people who were transferred out of the military branch. After all, they were once people who stood at the top. The military may have been completely different than the rest, but transfers were different even within the military itself. Even so, this fact alone did not make them similar to those below.
It was indeed evident that Tsutsujigaoka Renge and I were irregulars in this city. Even if our military affiliation was forcibly ripped away from us, the humiliation and disgrace continued to be carved in our bodies. After all, people who transferred out of the military were branded as pitiful little sheep— we were the baby birds who were unable to stay with the flock, unable to fly onwards. That's why, the "everyone" Tsutsujigaoka was referring to was probably *actually* everyone and not a specific group of people.
"That's why I'm really glad that you are here, Chigusa. That's why… I have to say my thanks," Tsutsujigaoka said as she smiled. "You paired up with me in the military, and this time we're in the same team. I feel much more relieved being near you."
Indeed, Tsutsujigaoka and I sure shared a lot of experiences together. It's been about a year since we worked as a sniper-spotter pair in the military, and from there, we pretty much followed the same path. But, even if we did follow that same path by doing the same things, our destination would ultimately end up being different. No matter how far we went together into the future, fundamentally, we were two different people.
I scratched my head and looked away from Tsutsujigaoka. "That's just saying stuff in hindsight," I said. "Even if it wasn't me, even if I wasn't there, you'd still be loved by everyone, Tstutsu… Chutsujiga… Tstsukakushichuchujiga… Chuchu… saying your name is too hard."
I fumbled my words, despite finally saying it properly in the end. I rarely did say her name, so saying it was still quite difficult.
She laughed nervously, blushing. "I-It really is! Sorry!! It's sometimes tough for even me to say…" she said as she coiled and uncoiled her hair with her finger. She then looked straight at me. "T-That's why you can just call me Renge! Renge is fine! Actually, please call me Renge!"
"Renge, huh? It is easier to say, and I won't have to worry about fumbling my words again," I said, speaking quickly to hide my uneasiness. I'm not used to addressing girls so casually, after all. In fact, I didn't even recall calling anyone by their first name.
Renge had a big smile on her face. "Yes!" she exclaimed. And with that, she fidgeted around nervously for a little bit. She embarrassingly glanced upwards at me and continued on. "Can I call you Kasumi then too?"
"Feel free to," I replied.
She reached her hand out timidly. "Then… Then… Kasumi it is!"

I couldn’t stop looking at her long and slender fingers, her smooth skin, and her delicate wrist. I hesitated a little bit because of that, so I was late in shaking her hand. As I reached out to shake her hand, I heard someone honk their car horn. I turned around and saw a box car revving up, with its front and rear of the car modded excessively. Blue LED lights hung everywhere around the car, and from a distance, the car could have easily been mistaken for a fishing boat. This vehicle would have probably been considered a relic even in the past.
“What an interesting company car…” I thought to myself.
I heard someone call my name. “Chigusa! Hurry up and get on!”
“Okay,” I replied. Renge turned around as well, just as Urushibara stuck his head out of the window.
“Well then, let’s go,” I said. I raised the hand that I previously reached out with and pointed my thumb at the car.
“Yeah!” she responded cheerfully as she smiled.
The two of us went into the company car… Well, I’m sure there’s still plenty of time in the future for us to properly shake hands.
—
The car frequently shook around as Urushibara drove. After driving some ways alongside the coastline, we finally reached the military’s Kisarazu base.
The “gate” that most <Unknowns> came from was in the ocean in front of Tokyo Bay, so the defense city of Chiba designated that Kisarazu be the center for military deployment. Once the presence of <Unknowns> was detected, the alarms would go off, the turret train would be deployed, and a strategic forward base would be set up on the Tokyo Bay Aqua-Line. This place, and this place only, was the front line that protected the world.
We parked the car horizontally to the base building and got off.
“Well then, Urushibara. I will go speak with Natsume and you will get these two settled in,” explained Tsurube as she pointed at Urushibara.
“Remember, we can’t meet their demands, so make sure we refuse whatever things they try to bring up.”
The meeting was about supply logistics for the next term and onwards: the military demanded a 20% increase across all its supplies. It’s only been a short while since I was transferred, so I didn’t know too much about the inner workings of the manufacturing branch yet. So, if the boss said that it’s impossible to meet their demands, then I’ll take her word for it.
Urushibara’s serious expression also made it painfully clear that we had no choice but to refuse their demands.
“Alright. Hey, Chigusa, let’s go,” he said harshly as he tensed up and glared at me. He then smiled at Renge and softly said, “Renge, you can leave this to me.”
He was really blunt about his favoritism, but I didn’t think he would take it this far. He was no doubt a multi-faced man with many expressions.

The four of us walked into the building as I continued to think about that. We checked in and continued into the hallway. As we did, there was a loud group of people who walked towards us from the opposite side. I instinctively moved to the side of the hallway to make some room for them to pass, but when they were near us, I distinctively heard a *tsk* sound. I turned around and saw that Urushibara had an extremely sour expression. Wow, was this another one of his many expressions? His range of expressions was truly wide.

"Woah!! If it isn't my little Uru-uru?" I heard one of them say once he noticed our presence.

"What's up bro?" said another.

The first boy had blond hair that was slightly gelled upwards. He was tanned and had a piercing on his nose. The second had dreadlocks with tattoos on both arms. The two turned around and approached us. A silver haired boy followed closely behind. He had close-cropped hair and was sporting some sunglasses.

Urushibara scowled and mumbled, "This looks pretty troublesome…" It seemed that Urushibara and this tanned guy knew each other. After all, the guy called him "Uru-uru," a name that seemed fitting for a mascot, but not an actual human.

"Who are these guys?" I asked. Urushibara looked extremely bitter.

"You were in this military branch so you should know, right?" replied one of them. "We are the top elites, man."

I looked at him. "Huh… Well I was barely in the front lines, so…"

"Me too…" added Renge.

The majority of missions assigned to both Renge and me dealt with supporting from the back. That's why we weren't that familiar with those in the front lines. So, without saying anything more, I just gazed onwards. As I did, the tanned, pierced blond jumped towards Urushibara with a shout and wrapped his arm around Urushibara's shoulders.

"What the hell, Uru-uru? It's been *soo* long hasn't it?" he asked teasingly.

"Don't talk to me," Urushibara said, looking annoyed. "I got work to do."

However, the tanned, pierced blond didn't move an inch. He leaned in on Urushibara with his arm still wrapped around him.

"Work? Hey, Uru-uru what do you even do now? Actually, we're about to go to a mixer with some kids from engineering class. Wanna come with us? It's gonna be wild!"

"With engineering students?"

"Yeah, yeah. Hey, wait a second. Pietro, today's actually with the kids from econ, right?"

"What? Leo, yesterday was with the econ people. C'mon, bro."

"Are you serious? I actually can't remember!"

Leo, who apparently was the blond, tilted his head and fidgeted with his hair as he contemplated. What a name Pietro was though… He looked Japanese, but was he actually from overseas?

In any case, it seemed these people were quite popular. They were, after all, at the top of the elites in the military, born and raised in Chiba. After graduating, some were even able to go inland. There were no doubt a lot of people who wanted to associate themselves with these punks. Well, even from way back, I suppose punks were quite popular. In any case, I'm really bad at dealing with these types of people, because they made for an environment that was hard for me to be in.
I stared at the group. I couldn't deal with any of them… Leo, Pietro, and even Urushibara. Tsurube looked a bit curious as she too stared at the group.
"Engineering, huh?" mumbled Tsurube. "Urushibara," she then said, calling out to him.
Urushibara responded immediately. "Yes, Asagao?"
"Change of plans," she said sharply. "I'll watch over these two, so you go on ahead. Make sure it goes well."
Wow, that's surprising— she seemed a bit encouraging. Being able to go to mixers without working was pretty much everyone's dream job.
Urushibara's face tensed up and he nodded. "… Got it," he replied, exhaling deeply. He definitely did not seem to be the carefree type that went to mixers. With his eyes wide open, he suddenly laughed. His white teeth contrasted with his darkish skin, and the scar on his forehead twitched. Honestly, it felt a bit weird looking at it.
The *educated gangster* called out to the group. "Wait, wait… Leo, you serious about me going?" he asked, smiling. "It's been such a long time since I went!"
Woah…. He sure did a 180 quickly. Then, what was that quiet and nasty expression he had on earlier? Leo and his group seemed to pay no attention to his quick change in expression.
"Yeah man, we *have* to go," said Leo with a smug face. "I brought some liquid capsules and eyedrops and everything."
"Oh shit, that's sick! No doubt about it!" responded Urushibara as he clapped. Pietro leaned in on him.
"Hey, yo! This is the comeback of the clubber, Uru-uru! You gotta show me how the Uru-uru do things, man. "
"Uru, let's do that again! The *Six Sonic Stitches of Blood and Ashes*! It's hilarious; all the girls will get driven away!"
"Ughh! Pietro and Mars, you guys are intense! I can't do that!"
Urushibara formed traces of a smile as even the silver haired boy slapped him on the back. He kept saying, "No way no way," but the three closed in on him even further.
"You will, won't you?" asked the three together. Urushibara suddenly went quiet, but the three wouldn't allow it. They took one step further in. Now, they were so close that their faces might have bumped into each other. A single drip of sweat flowed down as Urushibara clearly felt the pressure.

His lips trembled a bit, and the scar on his forehead continued to twitch around.
The three were persistent and asked again. “You will, won’t you?”
“Alright, alright!” replied Urushibara, shouting. “Today I’ll do up to eight stitches! Hooray!”
“Hooray!” mimicked the boys. They hit Urushibara on the shoulder while laughing boisterously and took off.
“Rough life, Urushibara,” I thought to myself.
Tsurube watched until they were far off in the distance. “In business, you need to be able to do those types of things, heh,” she said, nodding. “Plus, having that scar on your head is quite the honor. Hmm, indeed.”
If I had to guess, the *Six Sonic Stitches of Blood and Ashes* probably injured you one way or another. Seriously, I’d rather go jobless than get hurt like that…

Urushibara left, so it was just me, Renge, and Tsurube that went to attend the meeting. Well, it’s not like Urushibara would have made much of an impact, anyway. If I had to say who was the most important out of all of us, it would definitely be my boss, Tsurube. With her, I had more strength in negotiations, and she was the one always covering for me.
In this meeting, I just had to carefully refuse the military’s outrageous demands. I always seemed to get stuck doing this sort of job…
The meeting room was packed. Countless number of punks lined up in front of us. They were sitting down on the sofa, on the floor, and even on some tables. On the other hand, we looked like ordinary citizens who had been thrown into a black car and taken to some Yakuza’s headquarters. In any case, dealing with the military meant diving into this kind of atmosphere.
We sat down on a sofa. I was in the middle, with Renge on my right, and Tsurube on my left.
“I humbly apologize for taking up your time,” I said, initiating the conversation. “I have received your request for supplies and came here to discuss more about the logistics of such a request.”
I paused for a moment. “Honestly, the requested supply amount is just too much. It’s too difficult to fulfill.”
“Huuuuuuh?” growled a punk as he stared at me. His hair was all clumped into one long strand, kind of like an old school samurai.
But, I ignored him and continued speaking. “In fact, if you would let us explain, we propose to actually decrease the supplied amount.”
“The hell you talking about man!?!?” shouted the same punk angrily.
Surely they did not expect this response to their demands. The samurai punk got angry at what I just said and viciously kicked the table. Renge instinctively let out a little shriek, and Tsurube frowned as she stared at the samurai with her cold eyes. I myself was actually a little surprised too, but luckily I refrained from crying out.

“We estimated that this amount would be more than adequate,” I explained as I reached out with some documents. “Ah, here we have brought some documents that explain this in detail. Please take a look.”
These documents were very easy to read. They had bar, line, and pie graphs, all labelled thoroughly. These graphs were accompanied by numerous illustrations and pictures, which made them overall very pleasing to the eye. Not many words were written on them as well, so the visual impact was at a maximum.
I took a deep breath. “The line graph here shows the change in military personnel over time, and the bar graph shows our supplied amount. We took a survey in regards to customer satisfaction and represented the results in this pie graph shown here. As you can see, customers are actually extremely satisfied right now. Thus, it’s hard for customer satisfaction to go up even more solely from an increase in supplies. We propose that using the resources instead to push out a new product line would be the most effective way to further customer satisfaction. These pictures and illustrations show what’s currently under development. We also have to keep in mind that according to this data, the number of military personnel has decreased since last term.”
“Huh?” interrupted an arrogant looking blonde girl with a mushroom cut. She was wearing a long skirt and had a sour expression.
But, I ignored her and continued speaking. “On the contrary, if we oversupply now, there will be more problems for the both of us down the road. We certainly do not have a limitless amount of supplies.”
I thought I adequately laid out all my points from the start. Despite that, the samurai and the arrogant looking girl were both deep in thought as they tried to wrap their heads around what I just said. Oh well, I did expect this kind of response.
I heard a “huh” from around me, but I couldn’t tell if it was a sigh or a yawn. I glanced around and saw Renge with her mouth wide open. On the other hand, Tsurube let out a little yawn— she did look pretty bored.
Renge looked at me with such sparkling eyes. “Kasumi, this is my first time seeing you do this kind of talk…” she said, amazed.
“Well, I do talk like this often,” I replied. “At home, or even when I’m alone, you know.”
“He’s not that unreliable,” added Tsurube apathetically. She yawned again. “But I did think it was a bit too long… though it was effective.”
It seemed Tsurube already understood my analysis and explanation. My apologies for the dull content, then… But, it would be great if the people in front of us understood as well.
“What the hell you talkin’ about man! Speak more understandably, dammit!” shouted the samurai punk. He was clearly still confused. He kept on trying to look tough as he shouted some more nonsense.
The girl from earlier randomly took out a cigarette and smoked it. Looking extremely listless, she then exhaled some smoke. Soon, a minty scent

diffused across the room. She stroked her hair a bit, glared at me, then started to speak.
“Hey, you. We’re also trying hard here, you know.”
“I know.”
“So as a result we consume a hell lot of calories, right?”
“Sure.”
“So we gotta eat.”
“That goes without saying.”
“So you see why this amount is necessary for our members.”
“I see, of course.”
I just nodded in response without denying anything, then shrugged and pretended like I was sorry. As I did, she finished what she had to say and took another smoke.
“Right?” she asked as she grinned at me.
“I understand, I understand,” I agreed, nodding obediently. “So cutting down will be too detrimental to you guys, huh. I see.”
The samurai punk howled with laughter. “Aight! It’s all coo’ if you understand,” he said as he laughed some more. It seems he was satisfied with my responses.
I tensed up and nodded again. “I understand. Thus, we will adjust the amount accordingly.”
“You go do that,” replied the punks.
I stood up. “Now if you’d excuse me…” I said, but I felt something tug at my sleeve. It was Renge.
“Umm… Umm… Kasumi, so… what are you going to do?” she asked, confused. She tilted her head a little bit.
I replied quickly and without hesitation. “Well, our negotiations are over. I won’t decrease the amount.”
But I won’t *increase* it either.
Well, they looked happy enough with what happened. What’s left was to just get the deliveries over as fast as possible. If any problems arose, I’d just keep on apologizing while simultaneously ignoring what they had to say.
A businessman’s greatest skill was his unwavering heart. No matter what kind of complaints came his way, he’d adequately deal with it. He could mask, or even throw away, his emotions.
Personally, I’m not that good at talking with others. But I could at least plan out what I wanted to say beforehand. I could choose words that fit my needs in any situation and say those words all according to plan. Expressions like amazement, surprise, or worriedness were *only* just expressions in the end. Even if I had a certain demeanor or acted a certain way, on the inside, I’m always emotionless and indifferent.
Conversation ultimately led to an exchange of feelings. A lot of things go on in it, after all. There were things like trying to figure out other people’s thoughts, trying to avoid saying anything weird, or even making sure eye contact was maintained. People bad at holding conversations felt all sorts of

things like disgust, shame, or even hate during a conversation, and they were also constantly worried about other people's feelings. With all this in mind, it was inevitable that they would begin to hesitate.
But, in business, all this was unnecessary— there was absolutely no need for emotions. By not having any, people could not possibly exchange their feelings to other parties. This then gave them the upper hand in negotiations. In fact, the best business minds were the ones at ease. Likewise, the best business conversations were the ones where both parties were at ease.
But Renge, perhaps not understanding what I did, was unable to move on.
"…. Huh? What? Huh? This is okay?" she asked as she showed her confusion.
The other punks started to notice something was up. Like Renge, they started to go, "Huh?" and looked at each other. They thought hard about it and then looked suspiciously at us.
"This is bad…" I thought. The mood had shifted dangerously. If they started to use their fists rather than words in these negotiations, then I'm in big trouble.
"Go on, wrap it up…" muttered Tsurube during all the commotion. She adjusted herself in her seat and looked once again at the group in front of us.
"Then, I'll go ahead and leave the pending status on the proposal," I said, quickly following up. "Once we reach a consensus for the new proposal, we will contact you for another meeting."
They responded hesitantly. "S-Sure…" they mumbled.
I didn't give them any more time to process all the information I fluently spit out. My carefully chosen words hit them like a wave, and the punks were still very clearly confused. With this, it looked like my work here was done.
"Well then, until next time!" shouted Tsurube as she gave everyone an extraordinarily sweet smile. Her smile, which seemed like a blooming flower, stole everyone's hearts. Tsurube was surely not the punks' type, but her pure and innocent smile erased all their suspicions in an instant. They breathed a sigh of relief.
"Things seem to have wrapped up," she quickly said as she continued speaking. "After this, I have some business with Natsume, so can you please get her for me?"
The samurai punk nodded at her. "A-Ah, sure. We will call her here so wait a sec," he said, without even having the chance to ask further questions. Maybe due to the fact that there was nothing left to argue about, he was ready to move on.
With a single, "Let's go!" the punks all stood up. Following his lead, they all left the meeting room one by one while whispering to each other.
"Hey, what does pending mean?"
"It must be that… you know, the thingy in the vending machine."

“Yeah, that thing you plug into the outlet, right?”
“Wow, you sure are knowledgeable, Sho. Is that why you have a girlfriend?”
“What? No. He said petting, you idiots.”
“Hah?”
“Oh?”
“?!??!”
“Want me to fuck you up?”
“What the hell?”
“You were calling me out, right?”
“?!?!”
The punks took any opportunity to fight with each other. They stared each other down so much that veins started to appear on their foreheads. It seemed their discussion was going nowhere.
After they all left the room, Tsurube, still by my side, let out a huge sigh.
“Hah… Renge you are too honest,” she exclaimed with an extremely sour look. Her face was scrunched up a little bit. It was certainly a drastic change from her smile earlier.
As I thought… that smile earlier was just for show, wasn’t it? I didn’t know if a smile was an effective weapon for business, but it sure looked like it worked. *When things get serious, smile. When things get tough, smile.* Perhaps that was the way of business.
“I-I’m sorry. I was just making sure if it was okay…” sighed Renge as she put her head down in shame.
“Well, it’s fine, really,” said Tsurube as she looked at Renge in that sorry state. She then suddenly smiled and said, “I still think it’s one of your good points.” From looks and physicality alone, Renge looked much older, but it was at times like these when Tsurube seemed far more mature.
“T-Thanks…” replied Renge as she shied away. She was still embarrassed.
Tsurube nodded adamantly at her.
But, the heartwarming mood suddenly changed as Tsurube glared at me.
“And also, Chigusa, don’t lose focus. Saying some outrageous stuff in the beginning to gauge the responses is fine… and even letting them say whatever they want after is also not a bad tactic. Ignoring their responses and just tactically backing down is also fine… but if you want to cause mayhem and confuse them, focus, and do it properly until the end.”
“Okay…” I replied.
She had some fair points, so I wasn’t in any position to refute that. Besides, the way I negotiated in business was the same way I dealt with complaints. I would let them talk until they were satisfied, and then I would hit them with some of my important points. If I took them away from the actual negotiations and gave them a sense of fulfillment for saying what they had wanted to say, then the majority of the people became satisfied with whatever came up. But this time, the situation almost turned dangerous due

to my lack of a proper follow up. I was able to go through with it though, thanks to Tsurube.
“My bad, Tsurube. Thanks for helping me out,” I said. Even though I apologized and thanked her, Tsurube still looked unsatisfied. Was there something else she was mad about? I really hope not…
Luckily, she just sighed and said, “Don’t call me Tsurube. It’s Asagao.”
Renge leaned forward. “Yes, yes, it’s Asagao! It’s nice calling her Asagao, you know!” She then leaned even further forward so she could talk to Asagao. She got close… too close.
I tried to move away, but Tsurube was on the other side. *Ughh*… Too close and too narrow… this is troublesome. But Renge kept on leaning in. She smelled sweet, and soon I could hear her soft and gentle breathing. She also slid a bit on the sofa, so her bare thigh soon touched my knee, and a shiver went up my spine.
She continued. “That’s why… Kasumi… you try calling her Asagao too!”
“Ehhh…” I responded. I knew that Tsurube Asagao was someone who hated being called by her family name, but having said that, it’s still a bit awkward for me to call girls by their first name.
“C’mon, try it!” she said as she playfully pushed me towards Tsurube.
My shoulder bumped into her. “Ah, sorry……. Asagao…” I said hesitantly.
After having heard Renge say Asagao so many times, I instinctively called her Asagao as well. As I thought, calling her by her first name was really embarrassing— I could feel myself blushing.
Tsurube blushed as well, almost as if it was contagious. “It’s fine… Don’t worry about it…” she managed to say as she quickly turned her head away. “Keep calling me that…”
Her long hair swayed towards me as a result. I smelled a clear citrus scent, but I didn’t know if it was her shampoo or perfume. What I did know though, was that the scent suited her really well.
“Calling her Asagao is indeed nice, right? It’s cute too!” added Renge. She seemed to enjoy the fact that we were all getting along with each other.
“Well, I guess so…” I said, nodding.
Asagao suddenly turned around. “C-Cu….. Hah? What are you saying??!!?”
Renge was unfazed. “That I think it’s cute?” she responded, playfully tilting her head.
Asagao made a face that I’ve never seen her do before, but after seeing Renge snicker a little bit, she calmed down and started fidgeting with her front bangs. “…..Y-You really think so?” she asked, stuttering.
“I really do!” Renge said. She turned towards me. “Right, Kasumi?”
“Please, please no,” I thought. No matter how I answered that question, things would inevitable get awkward between us. That’s why I tried to give the vaguest reply possible. “… Well, I guess so,” I softly said.
I could talk on end for things that I didn’t really mean. But it’s hard for me to express things that I truly believed in. Underneath my facade, I really was just a shy little boy.

Illustration

Chapter 3: Brother, Sister, and the Rest

I'm used to waiting, so this was no big deal. Perhaps it was because I was originally a sniper. I would often stay hidden and wait for targets to come. I didn't even mind that sort of thing. After all, I am of the patient type. From waiting for my clients' responses to waiting for deliveries, I was always waiting. Well, if I could call it waiting. It might have been more like giving up.

It is often said that no news is good news. That's just simply not true. There had been many times when late responses often ended up in disastrous results. In contrast, early responses often indicated that there had been no problems. If my clients had liked what was proposed, then it's natural for them to immediately respond with a, "This looks good! When should we have our next meeting?" Similarly, if the deliveries had been on time, then they would definitely make sure to let everyone know that they had met the deadlines.

However, if their situation was dire, then they would cut all communications. I would then wait a while and call them up, only for them to respond with a, "Huh? That's still going on?" They would play dumb and avoid any responsibility. Even worse, some would try to shift the blame on me and ask, "Well, why did you think we would make it in time?"

Honestly speaking though, they weren't bad people. Normally, they would be friendly and easy to talk to. It's just that work, with all the strict deadlines and quotas, seem to bring out the worst in people.

It was always work that was at fault. Work was everything that's wrong with this world. If only work didn't exist, everyone would be able to live peacefully with each other.

Hate the work, not the people.

In business, this sort of thinking was absolutely needed. Actually, it's not even just limited to business. If people needed to connect with others, then they must be patient and open-minded. They must also be insensitive to even the most trivial things. So that's why, even if I had to wait ten, twenty minutes, it's really no big deal for me. In fact, when I was first transferred out of the military, I was assigned to do business with a few retailers, so I was used to waiting like this. Compared to those times, waiting for twenty minutes here was nothing— it was easy for me to stay composed. If I thought about the olden days when people literally died from overworking, then this was like a walk in the park.

However, Asagao was having none of it. "She's late!" she shouted with her arms crossed. She kept tapping her foot on the floor. "How long does she plan to make us wait here?!"

Renge sighed and looked at the door. "Maybe something happened…" she ended up saying.

“Well, this sort of thing happens often, right?” I asked. “I mean, at least we are treated pretty well here. We get to sit on a sofa and drink some tea and everything.”
“What kind of treatment do you usually get…” replied Asagao as she blew on the tea to cool it down. She was not in a good mood.
“No, it’s just that when I went to some shops, there were a lot of times when I had to wait around the register for up to an hour,” I clarified.
“Ah… Yes, in stores that does indeed happen!” said Renge, nodding. “I pretty much stay in the office all the time, but sometimes I do go outside too!”
Asagao was a bit startled. “That must have been rough, then.”
“I know right?” I added.
“If you wasted an hour, you would suffer some considerable losses in productivity,” continued Asagao as she nodded seriously. She rubbed her chin.
I paused for a moment. “… I don’t think that was the point,” I murmured. How much more does she plan to work us? She was dead serious when she said that too…
Asagao snorted at my response. She still looked dissatisfied. “Besides, why didn’t you just head back instead of waiting?” she asked.
“If I went back, then more problems arise,” I replied. “There are people in the shop that will complain and say, ‘Wow, why did you leave? Now it looks like we drove you out!’ Then, I would have to deal with more stuff…”
Even Renge was a bit drawn back. “Y-You sure visited some troublesome businesses…”
Well, even though Renge and I were in the same unit, we did do different things. I usually handled work outside the office, while Renge stayed inside to help work on development. But, from my experience, a lot of the shops that Urushibara had assigned to me were really annoying…
I continued to speak. “Those places… If you go as a customer, they put on a smile and act nice. But, if you go as a business partner, they become cold and unpleasant.”
Asagao once again responded with, “Yes, yes this is business, it cannot be helped.” She puffed up her cheeks and pouted. “But just make an appointment beforehand then,” she said. “That way, you both won’t waste any time, right?”
“An appointment won’t change anything,” I said, shaking my head. “They have customers too, see, and those get first priority apparently.”
Renge butted in. “Ah, yeah! There are times when shops are packed and things don’t go according to schedule. Sometimes they are really deep in their talks, so things take a long time.”
“Yes, yes. That’s exactly it,” I said. “You can’t talk to them unless they deal with all the other, *more important* stuff first.”

“Yeah…” agreed Renge as she nodded. We both had to deal with businesses, so she understood me well. It’s nice to have companions, isn’t it? It’s nice to be able to share the hardships together.
That’s why I wanted Renge and Asagao to both know that I considered them my companions… I wanted them both to experience, even just a little bit, the *wonderful* things that they still didn’t know about. I wanted to show them what working with businesses was *really* like.
So…
I turned to Renge. “Well then, Tsutsujigaoka Renge, here, I’ll show you.”
“Huh?” said Renge, bewildered.
Asagao was very suspicious of me. “What are you trying to do…” she said, looking at me.
Don’t look at me like that, forehead girl… Companions shared a lot of things together, including profits and passions, right? That’s why I also had to share my unpleasant memories! I had to show that you weren’t the only one that’s having a tough time, everyone was!
“C’mon, I’ll show you what I had to deal with,” I said with a fake smile. “It’ll just be a quick simulation.”
“I-I see…” replied Renge, nodding. She seemed okay with it. “It’ll be good practice for me too…”
She breathed in lightly and began. “I really appreciate this! How are the sales for the new products?” she asked, smiling. “I brought the promotion materials today. If you’d let me, I’d like you to look at the display here…”
I glanced at her smile and quickly averted my eyes. “Ah… I’m busy now, so can we put that for later?” I asked, sighing deeply.
Renge started to panic a little after being flat out refused. “Y-Yes, okay. B-But…” she muttered.
I made an expression that showed I was fed up with it and started to fidget with the papers in my hand. I stared at her intently. “I’m busy. Can’t you see? I’m occupied now, you see? I’m sorry, my apologies, my bad,” I said angrily. To keep it real, I only chose words that indicated I wanted to speak no further.
Renge slouched her shoulders and hid away to the corner of the sofa. “Y-Yes, I see. Sorry,” she said softly. She didn’t know what to do.
I looked at her. “Well, it always goes something like that,” I said, nodding at her.
“M-Must be rough…” she replied as she sniffled. On the other hand, Asagao’s face stiffened.
“It’s real rough…” I said with a big sigh. “But, it doesn’t end there.”
The two groaned with an *Ehhhh* as I said that and glanced at me with tired expressions.
I stared back at Asagao. “Hey, you. You know that new business guy? What the hell was that? He just left the promotion materials and went home.”

After hearing that, Asagao was shocked and tried to grab me. “That’s because you pretty much turned him away! With that the deal is off! No more!” she yelled angrily.
“Well, that’s what I wanted to say, too,” I said. Without touching her directly, I brought both my hands in between us and tried to calm her down. Though, I’ll admit I was a little happy. Thanks for being angry in my place, Asagao.
“Urushibara would receive that phone call and yell all sorts of crazy things at me,” I explained. “He would even set another meeting time for me to go and apologize.”
“Wow, that sucks,” commented Renge as she laughed bitterly. “I feel like that only happens to you, Kasumi…”
“Well, it probably is a special case, huh,” I thought. That being said, it’s something that had definitely happened to me many times before, so I couldn’t tell at all. I forced a smile in response.
Asagao, now calm after her outburst earlier, looked a bit dejected. “You two have it harder than I thought. I’m sorry, I had no idea…” she said apologetically.
I shook my head. “Nah, it’s okay. I really don’t mind work like that. Asagao, you’ve never had to deal with that before?”
Oops, I may have worded that wrong. I didn’t mean to sound condescending or blame her at all. I tried to follow up with some more positive words, but Asagao suddenly looked away. She seemed to be at a loss for words.
Finally, she spoke. “When I was in middle school, I was mainly dealing with developmental work… That’s why my business was more with suppliers and merchants rather than the retailers… So that’s why…”
Asagao spoke bit by bit; she sounded like she had some regrets. Though, her work was something she should have been proud of. The fact that she couldn’t say it proudly actually hurt me inside a little bit.
It really did.
The developmental work that Asagao was doing dealt with high quality, brand name fruits and vegetables. She also handled the raw materials for those foods. As such, these materials weren’t things that could have been simply be put on a store shelf and sold. Besides, most ordinary consumers couldn’t even tell the difference between the different qualities. That’s why it’s only natural for Asagao to have dealt with other cities and such. By dealing with clients higher up in the management chain, she was able to affect many below as a result. She was the one who created the abundant lifestyle many have today.
At the same time, I wonder if she had anticipated an effect on her products’ publicity as well. Some of her clients were at the top of the military branch. If the general population found out what these people were eating or using, then naturally they would begin to do the same. After all, these people were respected and revered.

Thus, Asagao created the first trend. There wasn't a lot of demand for specific products before, but that changed as consumers started demanding more and more of her products. She was the one who clearly defined what a trend actually was, something not known to many people before her time. In a time when battles still happened sporadically, the fact that there was a demand for her luxury goods proved that cities were changing for the better. Humanity was beginning to get some of its old glory back. Consequently, before even graduating, she became head of the manufacturing branch.

"People like me aren't great like you," I said genuinely. I was good at stringing words together, but the words I usually strung out weren't that sincere. No matter what I was feeling, I was unable to accurately convey my thoughts to other people. The moment I use these symbols we call words to speak, there becomes room for misunderstanding. That's why I tried to make things as understandable as possible.

After hearing that, Asagao's face tensed up and her lips trembled. She was probably surprised by the unexpected compliment, and her cheeks began to blush a little bit. "That may be so," she said with a pout. She then looked away quickly.

"Exactly! When I was in middle school, I didn't do a thing," said Renge enthusiastically. She went over me to grab her. "You really are great Asagao… from the beginning you were already so high up!"

Asagao smiled. "It's not that big of a deal. I couldn't even enter the military, so I had to work hard here," she added.

Renge looked puzzled at her self-deprecating response. "Asagao, you wanted to enter the military?" she asked.

"Everybody wants to enter the military," replied Asagao. "They offer a completely different way of life from the rest of the other branches."

"I guess so…" I muttered as I instinctively nodded in response.

The world was still in a state of war, so it was natural that military-related achievements were highly valued. People could expect great rewards for developing groundbreaking technology that could defeat many <Unknowns>. For example, they could be sent inland and live the rest of their lives in leisure, or they could be granted some high ranks.

Of course, the military branch offered the most chances to obtain these rewards. The administration bureau looked at everyone's results and contributions, and assigned an appropriate number of reward points for each person. People could gain points even if they weren't in the military branch, but as expected, the points they could get were magnitudes lower than the points obtained from just participating on the battlefield.

"Me too…" sighed Renge. "I thought if I just got into the military, then everything would work out somehow…"

I sighed as well. "Yeah…" I said, agreeing with her.

Asagao pretended to be angry after hearing us. “Well, my bad that you guys had to transfer here! If you have any complaints, tell them to Natsume directly.”
“Ah, no, I didn’t mean it like that!” replied Renge, flustered. She tried to correct herself. “Don’t take it the wrong way! I’m doing my best for the manufacturing branch as well! I like it here! I really do!”
Asagao jokingly ignored her response— it really was a heartwarming sight to see. I calmly took another sip of tea, and listened pleasantly as they continued to talk with each other. All of a sudden however, I heard footsteps on the other side of the door. A voice echoed from the hallway.
“Seems like she’s finally here…” noted Asagao as she stared intently at the door.
Without even so much a knock, the door was violently swung open, and a single girl appeared in the doorway.

She had tomboyish blonde hair, and her ragged uniform was open enough for her collarbone to show. But even so, her breasts weren’t particularly exposed. A very low-key ribbon seemed to hold everything together. However, in contrast to her being so casually dressed, she felt extremely dangerous. Perhaps that was due to her sharp, eagle-like eyes. With a single glare from those eyes, I felt like I was withering away. Or maybe I was just scared of her…
She looked at both Renge and Asagao, and smiled… She looked surprisingly friendly. The contrast between her sharp eyes and her friendly smile also had a certain allure to it. Finally she said, “My bad for taking so long.”
“Seriously…” grumbled Asagao.
“My previous meeting took longer than expected,” replied Natsume as she waved away Asagao’s complaints. “Sorry.”
Her arms were small and feminine, and they did not seem like the type that belonged to those at the top of the military. But, those arms were certainly not frail and delicate. They were lively, flexible, and powerful. In fact, the same could be said for her, Natsume Megu, as well. Her sleeves were rolled up past her elbows, and she was wearing a short skirt. The curves on her exposed arms and legs were just perfect as they looked really elegant. She wasn’t wearing any socks, so I could see the naked beauty of her legs all the way down to her ankles.
As I was still mesmerized by her legs, she plopped down on a sofa in front of us. Don’t open your legs like that… Don’t… Okay I saw that… I immediately looked away and purposely gazed at the door. There were more people that were coming into the room; perhaps they were her aides. They did seem like they were escorting and assisting her. Or perhaps they were just following her.
One particular girl was tanned and had dark blonde hair. She had large and black eyes, possibly due to her eye makeup or false eyelashes. I didn’t know her name, but I had definitely seen her before. If I remember correctly, she

was an upperclassman… Was her name Kuroki? No, that doesn't sound right. Was it Kuroba? Well, it didn't matter too much. I'll just call her black-eyes. Black-eyes sat down next to Natsume on the couch and started to comb her hair.
Behind black-eyes, another girl appeared. She looked extremely tired and irritated, and she kept sighing as she walked in. She had brownish red hair that looked a bit fluffy. Her very distinct eyes looked sleepy, and her beloved guns, glimmering vibrantly under the light, were strapped underneath her skirt. She was beautiful with her drowsy face and her small frame. Well, maybe beautiful wasn't the right word… She was more on the cute side, I think. But that's just me being objective.
After all, this girl, Chigusa Asuha, was my younger sister. She was younger than me by just one year. Without even looking at me, actually without even noticing me, Asuha leaned against a nearby wall and took out her phone. She fidgeted with it a little bit, yawned, and then turned towards me.
She blinked her surprised eyes a few times and exhaled. "Sup," she muttered.
I greeted her back. "Yo, Asuha."
"Hey," she replied. With that, she turned back to her phone.
So cold… Was she in her rebellious phase? Please no, I can't have that happening. At this rate she might become a punk too! Was she influenced by her friends? Punks seem to be everywhere in this town, especially in the military branch. Speaking of which, her skirt seemed to be shorter than before, and her ribbon seemed to be looser as well! Well, her breasts weren't that big, so it wasn't that big of a deal. Though, she's only in middle school… Next term she'll be in middle school! She definitely has room to grow, then… I'm worried… That being said, I need to communicate better as her older brother before we start to drift apart!
Renge called out to her before I had a chance to speak again. "Asuha! It's been a while!"
"Huh?" said Asuha as she looked up, puzzled. She looked at Renge dubiously as Renge waved her hand towards her. "Hm? Huh… Ah, A-Ah… Yo," she finally ended up saying with a quizzical expression. She immediately looked back down on her phone.
Renge laughed nervously in response. "Ah, hey… Umm… Asuha, do you remember me?"
You know what? I'm sorry for this, Renge… My sister is a bit, you know… Well, I'm sure she remembers you, so don't worry.
Natsume, still sitting in front of us, had the same quizzical expression on her face. She looked at Asuha, sighed, and turned back to Renge. "Renge, it's been a while. How's it going?" she asked.
"You remember me!" exclaimed Renge with a sparkle in her eyes. She was so happy that if she had a tail, she would be joyfully wagging it. Meanwhile, Asuha looked back up.
"Ah, yes, Renge!" shouted Asuha. As I thought, she did remember.

“I was always in the lower ranks… so I’m happy you remembered me as well!” continued Renge. She was so happy she could cry.
“Of course. There’s no way I’d forget,” replied Natsume with a bitter smile. Well, Renge was cute, so it was easy to remember her. But still, it was surprising for Natsume to have remembered her name. Natsume was the city subhead and Renge was just a low ranker, after all. I’m sure she didn’t meet with any of us that many times in the past. In fact, other than the time when she told us we were transferring out, we probably didn’t even talk to her directly at all. I stared at Natsume, impressed that she was that attentive to other people. Still, I’m sure she didn’t remember—
“… You too, Kasumi,” said Natsume, interrupting my thoughts. She smiled at me.
“Ah, Thanks… Thanks for taking care of my sister, too,” I said. Wow, I really didn’t think she would remember me. I mean, it could have been because my sister was always next to her.
“Oh, right! Asuha is your sister, isn’t she?” asked Natsume, surprised. “I always call her by her first name so I forgot about it.”
“Woah, so she’s your sister?” interrupted Asagao. “Speaking of which, I have heard of her full name, Chigusa Asuha, before… But she doesn’t even look like you.” She was sure blunt about her observations.
Asuha glared back at her. She looked really annoyed for some reason… Well, she didn’t like other people talking about her so casually, especially people she didn’t know…
“I guess so. There are times when they are quite similar, though. I’m really glad she’s with me,” said Natsume as she scooted forward. “Since Asuha is awesome, so awesome. Super strong. I’m always saying that she’ll be my next commander. Don’t you think so too, Asuha?”
“Thanks…” murmured Asuha. She looked back at Natsume and did some sort of a mix between nodding and bowing.
But as she did, black-eyes clicked her tongue in disapproval. “Asuha… You heard her question, right?” she asked, glaring at Asuha. “Why ya ignorin’ her? You actin’ all high n’ mighty just cuz she said you could do it a little?”
“Huh?” said an annoyed Asuha. She seemed like she had no idea what black-eyes was talking about. But, perhaps having just realized that she was talking to an upperclassman, she reluctantly responded, “Nah, not really. I’m not really ignoring her. I just don’t really care about such things.”
“Hah?” Black-eyes glared even harder at Asuha.
Asuha, still irritated, sighed and looked off to the side. With that, black-eyes got so angry she couldn’t even speak. Her veins even started to show on her face.
“Stop! Asuha, stop! Please get along with everyone! Be as close to everyone as you are to me!” I thought in a panic.
Things tensed up, but Natsume just laughed loudly. “Asuha has some spirit, haha. Its fine, I don’t really mind. She’s got some good guts, eh?”
“But, Natsume!” pleaded Black-eyes. She was still clearly dissatisfied.

Natsume patted her on the shoulder. “Its fine, it’s fine,” she said as she tried to calm black-eyes down. “Now then, Asagao, what do you need?”
It seemed things were finally moving forward.
“I came here to get this signed by you,” said Asagao as she looked at Natsume. She took out her tablet, and Natsume leaned forward so she could take it. As she did, her skirt rubbed against the leather couch a bit and I glanced at her even more exposed thigh. It was pretty eye catching…
Natsume turned her attention to the tablet screen. She took a look and sighed. “Ah, this, it would have been fine if you just did it back at your place, though…” she then said. She scratched her cheek, annoyed.
In response, Asagao furrowed her eyebrows and was not fond of Natsume’s attitude. “That was not possible. I had to talk to you about this very thing!” she shouted as she jumped up from her seat. “Me! Coming here! Just for you!” She smacked the table in front, and her forehead glistened under the room light. She continued on.
“Can you please stop recklessly throwing transfers at me? I’m not a trash can, you know!”
“So we really are trash…”
“It’s tough not being able to deny that…”
“No, I didn’t mean it that way!” corrected Asagao. She was always honest and upfront about her own mistakes. “I’m saying we aren’t below the military branch!”
Asagao’s honesty with her own mistakes was just one of her good virtues. Even against the city’s subhead, the top of the military branch, she would not back down at all. She always said what she needed to say.
“If you took them in, then take responsibility for them until the very end,” she yelled, lecturing Natsume. She got emotional and gave Natsume a threatening look. “There’s a cost to training these transfers, you know? Until they are trained to an appropriate level, they only take up our resources and make us suffer losses. On top of that, not just our branch, but it seems like you send transfers to other branches as well! What’s the meaning of this?”
In my opinion, she did lay out her points pretty well. She continued to press for answers.
Natsume was a bit overwhelmed. “I have also given it some thought…” she said softly as a single drip of sweat rolled down her forehead.
“You did? You sure?” snapped Asagao. Her look was intense, her words were sharp, and her forehead was glistening.
“I… Well, I really want…” She paused for a bit. “I think it’s best for everyone to be able to do all sorts of things…”
Asagao was having none of it. She went down hard on Natsume’s incoherent explanation. “You just thought of that, didn’t you! You big fool!” she shouted.
Upon hearing her, black-eyes suddenly opened her eyes wide open. “Fool… Hah? Who do ya think you are!??!?” she said, shouting back. She too

popped out of her seat and tensed up at Asagao. Without even so much a flinch, Asagao glared back at her.
The atmosphere was the tensest I've felt in a while. Even Asuha, who was still just nonchalantly leaning up against the wall, glanced at them alarmingly. Scary… Scary… I drew back my shoulders in fear and bumped shoulders with Renge. I felt her shoulders trembling a little bit, so I wondered if she would be okay, since she would no doubt be frightened at such a scene. I looked at her and saw that her shoulders were certainly trembling, but they were trembling because she was giggling too hard…
"You big fool…" said Renge, unable to contain her laughter. "Asagao, you sound like a mother…"
"No I don't!" shouted Asagao as she stared back at Renge. However, upon seeing her smile, Asagao seemed to loosen up. She looked exhausted, but a faint smile appeared on her face.
Renge's smile also seemed to positively affect black-eyes and Natsume. Asuha looked back down and continued to play with her phone. Black-eyes went *hmmph*, pulled out her make-up kit from her uniform pocket, and fixed her makeup. It seemed we were back on track.
Natsume looked at her and smiled. "Well, we can always talk more about this later…." she said as she handed the tablet back to Asagao. "For now, you got something for me to sign?"
Asagao stared at her. "Yeah… But, please think more carefully about your transfers from now on."
"I got it, I got it," assured Natsume. She reached out to sign. "I'll be more responsible."
With this, our business today was done. The meeting went okay and we got Natsume's signature. I can finally go home… Ah, but I got more work to do after, huh. I sighed deeply… I was so ready to go home too…
But suddenly, a piercing sound rang throughout the room. In fact, I'm pretty sure it rang throughout the entire Kisarazu base.
The sirens rang sharply in our ears: This is an emergency alert: <Unknowns> have been detected off Tokyo Bay. Please prepare to mobilize. I repeat. Please prepare to mobilize.
In response, with the announcement still repeating in the background, heavy footsteps moved throughout the building. The door to our room was slammed open. Punks stood in the doorway. "Boss!" they shouted.
"I got it. Let's go," responded Natsume in a firm, but calm voice. She stood up, and her demeanor instantly changed. In fact, she was like a completely different person now, much different than the friendly person she was before. She had on an expression that was ready for battle. Similarly, black-eyes put away her make-up kit, and Asuha reached into her holsters. They sure move fast…
Asagao reached out with her hand. "Ah, wait… The signature…"

“Sorry, Asagao. I’ll do it later. Forgive me…” responded Natsume with a sad look on her face. She rushed out the room. Black-eyes, Asuha, and the punks soon followed her out.
Asagao, Renge, and I were the only ones left in the room. Something tugged on my sleeve— it was Renge. This time she was truly nervous.
“Kasumi… W-What should we do?”
“Shouldn’t we just head back?”
“But aren’t they going into battle?”
“Yeah, but it’s times like these when we should just follow the orders of our superiors.”
“When you say superiors… Do you mean Urushibara?”
“That person is just an upperclassman, not the person in charge.”
“Oh… I always felt that he was in charge…”
“It’s because he always acts high and mighty. In terms of actual ranking, he’s pretty much the same level as us, just an ordinary employee…
Renge and Asagao both laughed, but Renge laughed nervously while Asagao laughed discretely.
“Sad, so sad, Urushibara…” I thought.
Renge glanced at Asagao. “Well then, it must be Asagao, then.”
Asagao sighed. “In the end, I’m just a member of the manufacturing branch,” she said as she put her hands on her hips. “During times of battle, I don’t have the authority to give orders. So I can’t really tell you what to do.”
“Then… Umm… Umm…” said Renge nervously.
I interrupted her. “Natsume it is, then.”
“Ah, right. Then I’ll go and ask!” she said as she rushed out of the room.
“Ah wait… but I don’t think there’s much we can do…” I said, trying to call out to her. It was too late— she was already too far out in the hallway. I looked at Asagao to see if she had any good ideas on what to do.
She shrugged. “Well, we have no choice but to follow her, right?”
“Yeah, I guess so…” I said, sighing. We reluctantly chased after her.
—
Fights near the Tokyo Bay often ended up near the Tokyo Bay Aqua-Line. Anytime that happened, the train with the revolving turret was deployed. That train was not only just for moving troops to the front lines, but also an effective tool for countering the <Unknowns>.
We reached the train hangar just in time as Natsume, black-eyes, and Asuha were just about to go on the train. There was the usual nervousness among the troops, but a few looked completely ready to fight. Renge, now out of breath, went through the crowd and tried to reach them, so we had no choice but to follow her. This girl sure has initiative…
“Um… Natsume! What should we do?” shouted Renge. “We thought it’d be best to ask you!”
Natsume darted her eyes to her upon hearing her. Asuha sighed, and black-eyes grumbled annoyingly off to the side.

But Natsume took one look at Renge and gave her a big smile. “Umm… You came here just to ask that? Hmm…” she contemplated. She turned silent and looked a bit troubled. She glanced quickly at both Asagao and me, and her look said it all. Renge and I were not part of the military branch anymore, so she had no intention of taking us to the battlefield.
Renge sensed this as well. “Ah, I’m so sorry…” she apologized, depressed. “I knew we’d just hold you back, but I just wanted to check just in case…”
Seeing this, Natsume walked up to her. She then lightly patted her on the head and rustled her hair. “That’s not true!” she said reassuring. “We’re all friends and family here. That’s why we rely on each other… Renge and Kasumi, is it okay if I borrow your help then?”
Renge was moved to tears by Natsume’s comforting words. “S-Sure….” she muttered.
“This girl is really inspiring… I’m getting pumped up just by hearing those words…” I thought to myself.
But black-eyes rubbed her hair, clearly still irritated. Asuha looked annoyed as well and looked away quickly. The two didn’t seem to be of the encouraging type.
“Well then, Renge, Kasumi,” said Natsume as she patted Renge’s head one more time and climbed on the train. “I’ll leave it to you.”
“Also, Asuha,” she added before going inside. “Take care of these three, okay?”
Asuha, still outside, sighed and continued to look elsewhere. “Hah… I thought you’d say that.”
Natsume smiled bitterly. “I’d feel much more relieved if you were with them,” she said. “Take care of them, okay?”
“…Okay…” replied Asuha apathetically. Natsume and black-eyes then disappeared into the train. We started to follow them into the train, but Asuha poked me repeatedly on the shoulder.
“Not here. We’re in the rear, I think,” she said.
“Oh, right…” I muttered.
And just like that, after half a year, we returned back to the battlefield. Strong winds, thunderous roars, and gunpowder smoke. We were jumping straight into the battlefield that had it all.

The train arrived on the Tokyo Bay Aqua-Line, and its turret slowly rotated out towards the sea. The grinding sounds of its gears and mechanisms echoed throughout the area. What lied on the other side was none other than the group of <Unknowns> that had appeared.
The battlefield itself was trembling. The ocean waves intensified, and the atmosphere tensed up. From above, the sky split violently apart, and even the clouds were twisting and turning. Unknowns started conjugate below, like heat rising from the ground, or like oil rising from water.

The light from the dwindling sunset refracted, and the resulting rainbow split far off into the distance. A dark light seemed to lurk right behind, accompanying it. Both lights illuminated the train interior thoroughly.
Strange things peered from the sky. They looked grotesque, almost monster-like, though they were neither animals nor plants. In fact, they looked more mechanical than biological. Their numerous limbs were indeed very animal-like, but they also looked like withered branches, devoid of any leaves. The limbs looked as if they had been hastily attached onto their bodies. Their metallic, armor-like skin glistened under the light. Even though their skin may have looked inorganic and cold, it gave off a sense of softness and warmth.
The monsters finished coming out of the gate. They gave off a hideous roar, as if they were laughing. It was unnerving to say the least. They were a disgrace, carved permanently into humanity's everlasting memory, and the source of the humiliation felt by us all. They were the <Unknowns>, an abnormal lifeform that caused worldwide destruction. With humanity's mortal enemy lined up right above them, the troops gave a bloodthirsty grin.
In front of the train, on the Aqua-Line, the military base Umihotaru stood tall. An alarm rang solemnly, and a bridge started to come out. This ever-changing base served as the deployment point for many of the troops and equipment. Of course, it also served as cover in the front lines.
"Alright you people, get in position!" heroically yelled Natsume into the microphone. She stood at the highest point in the base so that people could see her no matter where they stood. "It's time to win once again! I don't wanna see fear in any of your eyes, got it? Let's go!!"
Illustration
The turrets were manned and the artillery was ready to fire. The students prepared their weapons and charged forward. We were far behind them, towards the side of the Kisarazu base, but we were able to see what was going on clearly. No, actually it would be more accurate to say that we were *only* able to watch and see. There was nothing we could really do. We were in the front lines, but even so, we were still in the back. The real battlefield was about a kilometer north of Umihotaru, so it was close enough to see, but not close enough for them to attack us directly. In other words, we were still pretty much spectators. Well, I guess it was safe, and I could still see everything pretty clearly. Not a bad position to be in.
Renge leaned off the bridge and observed Natsume with her binoculars. She kept going, "Wow!" and was clearly fascinated by what Natsume was doing. Asagao held onto the back of her uniform tightly, afraid that Renge might fall into the water. Asuha, a few steps away from us, sat nonchalantly on the handrail. She didn't pay any attention to us. Rather, she kept fidgeting with her pistols.
The pistols, huh…
"Natsume is so cool…" said Renge, amazed as she watched on.

In contrast, Asagao stood there with a cold expression. “Everyone’s following directions pretty well,” she added.
“I don’t think she gives any orders in actual combat,” answered Asuha as she kept fidgeting with her pistols. “Well, maybe she does, I don’t know. I do my own thing, so…”
Asagao was astonished. “Oh I see… Speaking of which, why is this girl not using honorifics? I’m an upperclassmen, right?”
“Tsurube-senpai?” asked Asuha.
Asagao was cold hearted as she sternly folded her arms. “Hmm, I don’t really like that either…”
Asuha frowned, looking annoyed. “Then, forehead Asagao it is!” she exclaimed.
“Hell no!” shouted Asagao. “Why do you have to add that unnecessarily? You wanna die?”
“Calm down, Asagao…” whispered Renge. Asagao looked like she was about to grab Asuha, but Renge grasped both hands around Asagao and stopped her. I’m sorry about this, forehead girl. Sorry about my sister… I really should have warned her not to do this kind of thing…
“Asuha, please don’t say that,” I said, trying to calm everyone down. “Asagao was probably bullied about this kind of thing when she was younger.”
“Exactly! Exactly that!” said Asagao. “Wait, how did you know that Chigusa?!?”
“I can guess that much, at least…” I replied. If I had known Asagao when we were both younger, I probably would have teased her about it too… All boys are like that, right? They always tease the girls they liked or something like that…
“You know I’m a Chigusa too…” muttered Asuha begrudgingly. She groaned.
“Ahh!! I’ve had it!” shouted an annoyed Asagao. “This is getting annoying. Then I’ll just say Kasumi instead…”
“Umm… What’s this all of a sudden…” I said, surprised to hear my name thrown in there. Asagao looked at me suspiciously.
“Huh? You are Kasumi, right?”
“I am… but calling me by my first name is a bit…”
“Well you do call me Asagao, don’t you?”
“True… No, it’s just that I’m not used to it… You know… It feels weird…”
“What kind of reason is that…”
Asagao was a bit drawn back. She clearly didn’t get my reasoning. I mean, I was probably just embarrassed, but showing embarrassment upfront is a little embarrassing itself. It was in bad taste though to suddenly call people, especially the self-conscious ones, by their first name. Sometimes it gets them all riled up as they tried to figure out if there was any particular reason for the change. After all, except for the times when people were

joking, it's hard to find out what they were trying to do. But, from time to time, there were people like that.
"Ah, me too! Call me Renge too!" interrupted Renge, raising her hand. She smiled cheerfully, almost going *yes, yes*! "Kasumi calls me Renge already!"
Well, Renge was great at communicating things unconsciously, so for the most part everyone knew what she was thinking. That's why it was very easy for Renge to get along with everyone, including me, and that's why she didn't cause much misunderstanding or anything like that. I'm grateful for that, Renge.
…Wait a second, Asagao had always acted this way to everyone, I think. Is it confidence? Or determination? Or cockiness? It's definitely cockiness, huh. I nodded in satisfaction as I made up my mind.
Asuha jumped off the guardrail soon after. "In any case, it's fine to call me Asuha too."
Asagao looked puzzled for a moment. "Sure, yeah," she said as she rubbed her hand on her chin.
"I mean, I really don't mind either way," said Asuha. She leaned on the guardrail and stared out into the sea.
Just as I thought that she would watch the battle a bit more, she suddenly turned around and said, "Is it okay if I go? I wanna end this quickly so I can shower…" She acted detached to the whole situation, but looked restless fidgeting with her hair. It seemed she was really eager to join the battle. She was on track for a promotion too, so I'm sure she didn't want to waste time protecting us.
"Sure," I said, nodding. "Good luck."
In response, Asuha silently pumped up her fist at me. "Take care of the rest," she said quickly and prepared to head out.
But Renge soon called out to her, bewildered. "Umm… Uh… What should we…" her voice trailed off.
Asagao sternly interjected, "You… Natsume gave you an order, right?" Asuha frowned.
"Ah… It's alright, isn't it?" assured Renge. "We are pretty far from the battlefield."
"Yeah," I said as I agreed. "Plus, I'm here too."
Asuha sighed upon hearing us both. "Huh? That's hilarious," she laughed. "You? I'm still way worried."
"It's not hilarious, not at all," I said, picking up the nearby sniper rifle that I snatched from the equipment room earlier and showing it to her. "For real though, don't worry about it."
"Kasumi, I didn't realize you had borrowed that," said Renge, fascinated. "With you having that, I'm relieved!"
"…Relieved?" anxiously asked Asagao. She looked at me. Well, it's no surprise that she would think this way. It's impossible to expect people to trust the military capabilities of those transferred out of the military branch, after all.

“It’ll be okay! I trust Kasumi’s sniping,” assured Renge. She gave Asagao a thumbs up and a wink. “As long as it’s not anything too powerful, at least!”
“Don’t put too much pressure on me…” I said as I sighed.
“…Well, if Renge says so, then okay,” said Asagao, but she still looked uncertain. In any case, it’s unlikely that the <Unknowns> would attack here anyway, so she was just having some needless anxiety.
Asuha observed halfheartedly. She then walked up to Asagao and started poking her back. Asagao turned around only to be waved closer by her.
“Hold on, hold on.”
“What is it?”
“Uhh… Hold on, hold on…”
“Like I said, what is it…”
Asagao moved closer to Asuha. But then, Asuha ran up behind me and leaned in to whisper in my ear. Perhaps she did not want the other two girls to hear.
“You don’t have to push yourself so hard…” she whispered. Her voice still sounded cold, and her words were bluntly delivered.
But I could see the worry in her eyes… “You know that’s not happening,” I said as I smiled at her. Sometimes, people who trust in their abilities too much are the ones who suffered the most traumatic experiences on the battlefield. Not me, though, since I knew myself well. I didn’t even trust myself, let alone my abilities. After all, I was the one fired from the military branch. I was not a prodigy like my sister.
“Besides, have I ever pushed myself too hard?” I added.
“No, I guess not, huh.”
“You agreed too quickly, too quickly… Shouldn’t you say, ‘That’s not true!’ or something like that?”
“Nah, bro. You are like super weak,” she said with a straight face and motioned a no way. “It’s way impossible.”
“Stop looking so serious, please…” I thought.
Asuha turned away from me quickly. “Well, I guess it’ll be okay, since you said so…” she said softly as she walked up to the guard rail and jumped onto it. She then turned her head towards me and did a big smile. It was so innocent that it actually suited her age well. She looked like a young girl heading out from home.
“Well then, I’m off,” said Asuha as she pulled out both her handguns from underneath her skirt. She turned back to the <Unknowns>, and her eyes tensed up. The sunset glow lit up her red hair, and her eyes turned bloodthirsty. Her innocent smile earlier quickly turned into a violent grin.
She was not the only one who had changed. The world was changing all around her. In this very world, the manifestation of the unimaginable began to appear. The world she saw in her dreams, the world she could see now, and the <World> she possessed, all of them crept up into reality. Reality itself was turned upside down, and a new phenomenon was born: the <World>.

Asuha fired a shot towards the sea. Her bullet froze the spot solid, and she jumped onto the newly formed ice platform. One after another she continued to shoot and jump. Even the nearby ocean breeze was frozen as she kept freezing the waves. She used this method to run across the ocean.
A <World> that gave the ability to suspend motion: That was the <World> she possessed. Not only that, she was even able to move the molecules at will, albeit only for a short moment. In addition to being able to slow these molecules down, she was also able to speed them up, thus creating heat. In any case, the abilities of <Worlds> were things of that nature. <Worlds> defied common logic and went against the laws of physics. Our understanding of the world changed drastically due to these <Worlds>.
The adults that lived inland had put us students into defense cities. They probably wanted us to learn to cope with our newly obtained, but completely unexplainable powers. As a result, we continued our defense as we learned how to function as a society. Out of our love for humanity and desire to save the world, we continued to use our reality-defying powers to blindly go into battle every day. In my opinion, that in itself was absurd.
Mad. Crazy. Lunatic. I wondered if we were monsters as well. If we were, my sister would probably be one of the most ideal ones.
Asuha continued to jump across the ocean until she reached the rest of her troops. Still using the frozen waves as platforms, she started her slaughter. Blueish-white flashes of light filled the sky as she mercilessly incinerated the Unknowns. A red afterglow seemed to linger around her attacks. Renge and Asagao soon joined me in observing the battle.
Renge once again looked through her binoculars. “Asuha is amazing!” she exclaimed as she watched.
I nodded. “Yeah, of course!”
“Why are you acting so proud…” asked Asagao, disheartened. It’s obvious that I would be proud of my sister, though. In fact, what was she trying to imply?
“A-Asuha is just crushing them left and right,” continued Renge, clearly still in admiration. “She really is so amazing… To be able to defeat all that by herself… It’s beautiful…”
Well, it’s not like I didn’t understand her feelings.
The crimson sunset glow gave the blue ocean a deep scarlet color. In the midst of that, <Unknowns> were dropping like flies into the ocean, accompanied by blueish-white flashes of light. Gray ashes born from the red flames seemed to dance with the wind and waves. The whole scene was so surreal. In the midst of it, Asuha seemed a bit too far forward. Or maybe that was just how much more powerful she was compared to the rest of the troops. After all, her <World> was unmatched by others— including mine.
I set up the sniper rifle I had borrowed earlier and lied down in the appropriate prone position. “I’m gonna be ready just in case,” I said after.
“Ah, okay. I’ll back you up!” shouted Renge excitedly as she booted up her device and established a connection. She put in an earpiece and readjusted

her binoculars, and then gave me a thumbs up; it seems things were done on her side. Renge's fast preparation speed seemed to catch even Asagao's attention. She looked interested as she watched us nimbly set things up.
"Umm… Asagao, what are you going to do?" asked Renge after noticing Asagao just watching us.
"I'm just gonna watch… I'm not in the military," replied Asagao. "Besides, I didn't even bring any equipment with me." She waved her empty hands around to show that she indeed did not bring anything with her.
Strictly speaking, military equipment were things like Asuha's handguns, or the rifle that I borrowed, but in a broader sense, anything that helped boost people's <Worlds> were also considered. However, only people from the military carried this kind of equipment on a day to day basis. People from other branches only carried them around if it was required for them to do so. That's why Asagao was completely unarmed at the moment.
"It's okay to evacuate, you know," I added. "We may be in the back, but we are still on the battlefield."
"Then there should be no problems," responded Asagao nonchalantly. She continued to stare at me. "I don't want to be the only one running away."
"I can't stay calm with you watching…" I said. I wondered how long she would be watching me for…
She pouted, annoyed. "Renge's watching you too, isn't she."
"It's because I'm a spotter," answered Renge as she raised her chest triumphantly.
Asagao had a blank look on her face. "Spotter?"
"I team up with a sniper, observe and analyze the surroundings, and gather coordinates," explained Renge. "Then I calculate the measurements for the distance, angle, and alignment so the sniper can adjust them accordingly."
"I see…" said Asagao. She actually looked a little interested as she continued to watch.
"Wanna try a little bit?"
"Uh… Umm… Sure, just a little…"
Renge took out her spare binoculars and handed them to Asagao. Even though Asagao was usually the more mature one, right now it was Renge who acted like the older one. Asagao hesitated, and then timidly took the binoculars from her. She grasped them tightly with both hands as if they were some valuable treasure and peered into them with excitement. She smiled happily.
"… Woah. Oh my god! Huh??? Ouch.. ? Ohhh… Whew! Amazing…" she said as she observed the battle. Her expressions were all over the place. Amazement, surprise, disgust, or contempt— she had it all. There were times when she would even gasp in admiration. Her smile was similar to that of a young girl deeply in love, but suddenly, her expression changed to absolute fear.
"Holy! Woah, it's close!" screamed Asagao. "It's real close! Oh my god!"

“Really?” asked Renge, and she took a look in her binoculars. “Oh wow, *woooahhh*, they are near! Kasumi! Your 5 o’ clock! One strayed off and is coming straight here! It’s close!”
I turned my rifle to the 5 o’ clock direction and looked into the scope. “Some more details would be nice…” I added softly.
The absolute maximum range on this rifle was 1500 meters. If I brought down the stray <Unknown> here, then there would be no need for us to fall even further back. Even if I missed the first shot, I could just adjust the aim and try again. As long as I killed it within three shots, it should be fine.
I carefully aimed my sights at the <Unknown> and lightly breathed out. After doing so, I focused on emptying my mind. I closed my eyes as my mind went blank. The sunset illuminated my eyelids red, so my vision turned completely red.
However, my <World> allowed me to hear the sound of all things. Because of that, I heard the ocean breeze, I heard the rough waves, I heard the gunshots, and I heard the seagulls frantically crying out. But most importantly of all, I heard a single disturbance in the air. A few hundred meters in front of me, the wind was unnaturally loud.
An echo started to reverberate within me. It started softly, but quickly intensified. Many other echoes of varying amplitudes soon followed, and my head was flooded as they piled up from within. These echoes continued to appear and merge together until they formed a single image in my head.
Looking at it, the total length was about three meters. Ah, this type… I have killed this type of <Unknown> before. There should be no problems dealing with it, then. I continued to mentally search for the exact spot in the image where all the echoes converged to.
And at last, I finally found it.
As quietly as the snow falling in a snowy day, as gently as I would pat my sister on the head, I pulled the trigger.
Bang.
“… Ogre class, Kill confirmed,” said Renge a few moments later. I took a deep breath upon hearing her.
“… It hit. Was that you, Kasumi?” asked Asagao, dumbfounded, as she turned to me.
Without thinking, I laughed nervously. “Well, it wasn’t too far out, so…”
“Amazing. Kasumi, I never knew you were this amazing…” continued Asagao with an unusually childish tone. In fact, she sounded like a child that had been impressed thoroughly. Her eyes were even sparkling with delight.
“Don’t look at me like that… It really was no big deal…” I wanted to say. But I ended up saying, “Nah, all the snipers could at least do this much. My kill count was one of the lowest among them… Actually, it probably was *the* lowest.”
I was not exaggerating. My military rank was the absolute bottom tier, so I was moved to the very back lines. Consequently, there weren’t many chances for me to have participated in battle. My job back then was just to

pick off the <Unknowns> that had strayed away from the main group, similar to what I just did now. Of course, I was rewarded negligibly compared to those who fought in the front lines.
“Oh…” sighed Asagao.
“Yeah, yeah! Natsume, Asuha, and Kasumi are all amazing! Everyone’s amazing!” nodded Renge enthusiastically.
“Huh…” interrupted Asagao. “It didn’t seem like you did much as a spotter, though…”
Renge laughed nervously as she tried to dodge the question. “N-Not true! Normally I’d do more things… but there’s a lot of free time in a sniper pair… It’s not good, right? Teaming up with me only for me to just talk and talk… Ahahaha…”
Asagao gave her an apathetic look, but Renge adamantly continued on. “T-That’s why even with all my talking, the fact that Kasumi can still concentrate like that is amazing!”
“Ah, I can see why,” nodded Asagao. “Kasumi doesn’t really listen to people, huh?”
“No I’m listening alright. I just can’t help it… I’m bad at communicating…”
I truly was listening; I may have even been listening too much. My <World> filled my head with all sounds, including voices, to the point of abnormality. Thanks to that, when I was still a sniper pair with Renge, I was able to hear other sniper pairs talking shit about us… I guess that’s why I became good at ignoring people. There’s a clear difference between not being able to hear other people and just flat out ignoring them.
The two of them continued talking, but I tuned them out and looked into my scope one more time. There was no indication of any more <Unknowns> coming our way. Instead, I saw our elites slowly but surely kill off the rest of them. Like so many times before, I continued to lie prone on the ground and quietly listened as the rest of the <Unknowns> got dealt with. There were no more opportunities for me to pull the trigger.
… Every single time it was always the *same* thing. It was just business as usual.

Chapter 4: For Her to Change the World

My keyboard clattered throughout the office cell as I continued to type. Perhaps it was because I hadn't been in the battlefield for so long, but I kept writing, then deleting, then writing again, then deleting again.

In the end, I was only able to kill that one <Unknown>. It was just as I expected, though. I was so far behind the front lines that I never even expected to encounter any enemies in the first place.

The military was all about the kill count. For the time being, my one confirmed kill would get approved, and then during the evaluation period, I would obtain the appropriate amount of points. I didn't expect to get a lot of points for that kill, however, and certainly nowhere enough for a promotion. Back in the day, I would sometimes get a decent amount from a battle, but for the majority of the time I would get almost nothing.

On the other hand, fulfilling my quota for the manufacturing branch was a slow, but steady way to get points, though the amount was obviously much lower than that obtained from constantly fighting on the battlefield. For people wanting to get ahead, fighting in the military branch was always the best bet. Despite that, I preferred working in the manufacturing branch because I was able to utilize my intelligence over my strength.

I continued to daydream a bit while typing up my report. Suddenly, I heard a beep as the security lock on the door was unlocked from the outside.

"Who could still be here this late?" I thought as I turned towards the door. As I did, the automatic door slid open and out stood Asagao.

Asagao blinked a few times as she looked at me, confused. "You're still here? You can go home, you know."

"Well, my work here is still not done," I said. Speaking of which, you were the one who told me to stay in the first place… I showed my displeasure as I glanced back at her.

"Even so, please go home," she said calmly as she took a seat on the desk. She started fidgeting with her pen and then looked straight at me. "It's just not worth keeping the office running overnight and doing all the overtime paperwork and stuff."

"Well, I wasn't even going to stay here overnight…" I said. "But if my work is not finished, that would be troublesome, right?"

"Can't you just do it at home?"

I looked at her in shock. "You can't be serious…" I said, wondering why she could say that so nonchalantly.

However, for some reason, Asagao was shocked as well. "There is a cost for keeping the electricity, maintenance, and security systems running, you know…" she said, shrugging her shoulders. "But you working at home… now *that's* free."

"That's not right…" I said grimly.

“Well, I guess it’s not exactly free. We do pay you every month for your work, huh.”
“And you will work me every bit of the way for that amount…” I grumbled. “Besides, that’s not what I meant, not at all…”
Asagao just playfully laughed at my complaints, though she ended up yawning as well.
“If you’re tired Asagao,” I said, noticing her yawning. “Why don’t you go home?”
“Yeah, I’m going back soon,” she replied as she exhaled deeply and arched her back, stretching her entire torso. She sluggishly straightened her hair a bit with her fingers and sighed deeply. “… Even so,” she continued after a pause. “You were great on that battlefield. I can still hear the sounds ringing in my ears.”
“It takes a while to get used to,” I said. “Well to be fair, in the end even I couldn’t get used to it…”
I only really started fighting on the battlefield in the first six months after I became a high schooler. Even in those battles, I was only sent there to deal with the stray enemies. I had trouble joining in on the battlefield because everyone fought selfishly in order to rack up those points. I was soon transferred to the manufacturing branch, so there was no way I could have gotten much experience on the battlefield.
But Asagao, who just recently experienced her first battle, was thinking of something completely different. She quickly spun a chair around towards me, sat down, and asked, “Kasumi. Why did you leave the military?”
“Umm… I was told that I had to be transferred?” I said softly. “For now, I technically am still with the military, though…”
“*Why* were you transferred though?” Asagao adamantly asked again. “From what I saw, you were plenty strong, right?”
I sighed. “Compared to the top elites, I’m nothing… The other fighters… they could easily drop ten or twenty without breaking a sweat. Now compare that to the numbers I get when dealing with the leftovers…”
“That’s also important though!” shouted Asagao as she rested her chin on her hands. She scowled in disgust.
“Not necessarily. It only takes one person to do it, and it’s really more waiting than fighting. Snipers are valued pretty lowly when dealing with the <Unknowns>.”
“Wha— Why?”
“Well, for one, snipers deal with a lot of behind the scenes stuff. We not only deal with the target straight up, but we also value understanding its thoughts so we can fully utilize that to our advantage.”
Through mainly their tactics, snipers instilled fear into the enemies. They constantly made the enemies worry that somewhere out there, someone could be targeting them. Enemies would always be scared of making careless moves, because to them, one wrong move meant certain death. As a result, their movements were usually very limited. In fact, the best sniper

teams could put so much pressure that even a small platoon would be frozen in fear.
Asagao's eyes widened. "Wow, you sure are knowledgeable about this."
"That's nothing to be surprised about…" I muttered.
The Chiba military branch as a whole felt pretty similar to a gang. They were full of punks, and people who didn't act like them felt extremely out of place. Those people were even humiliated and picked on. The punks followed a strict code: Those who were good at academics were bad! Those who fought using their heads were cowards!
In any case, they valued strength above all.
"But still, snipers are still needed, right?" asked Asagao with a doubtful look.
"Back then, yeah," I replied. "That's only because the enemies were humans, though. When dealing with these monsters, our tactics become completely useless since they literally have no thought processes. It's impossible to read them."
Asagao stroked her chin as she thought long and hard about what I just said. "I see," she finally said. "<Unknowns>, huh? It's true we'll never be able to understand those monsters…"
"Yeah," I said. "That's why the previous city head chose to just go for all out annihilation. It was probably much easier that way."
"The previous? You mean Natsume Kayako, right?" she asked meekly. "Natsume's older sister, huh…"
"Yeah, her," I said, nodding.
In a sense, Natsume Kayako was a revolutionist. Only up until a few years ago, the main forces against the <Unknowns> consisted of two groups: the Tokyo and Kanagawa militaries. Tokyo specialized in aerial combat, while Kanagawa specialized in naval combat. On the other hand, Chiba, who specialized in land combat, had a hard time fighting due to the fact that the <Unknowns> almost always appeared in Tokyo Bay. As a result, they lagged behind the other two cities and ultimately ended up as a mere backup force.
In this world, people's very existence was determined by their results on the battlefield. Taking away people's opportunity to fight was the same as leaving them out to die. The previous city heads, fearing their inevitable demise, strived to change Chiba for the better. To accomplish that, they kept pushing the military to newer and newer heights. The turret train, for example, was just one of the many things implemented by them.
Within all this, Natsume Kayako enacted the biggest changes of all. She aimed for about ten percent of the population to be part of the military branch, and within that ten percent, she picked a few out to be part of the elites. She constantly advocated fighting with overwhelming firepower from afar, and engrained that belief into our heads. Those who were weak and useless were allocated to the back lines or transferred out. On the other hand, anyone who was strong was able to participate in the front lines. Age,

affiliation, or beliefs— none of that mattered if you were strong. In fact, it was due to this very change that my sister was sent to the front lines even as a middle schooler.
At the same time, the snipers, who really didn't have much to show in terms of results, were slowly forced into the back lines.
"Well, if the city head decided all this, then there's not really much we can do," I said. "We're part of this system, so we have to obey their orders."
"That's true," contemplated Asagao. "Only the city head can change this system. Speaking of which, your sister is amazing…" she said, looking up at me. "But I think you already know that…"
I looked at her and grinned smugly— of course I already knew that. I'm glad she finally realized how awesome my sister is.
"Ughh, don't look at me like that," she said, disgusted. She lightly bit her lip. "But just from seeing what she did in that battle… she could be the city head one day. I mean, anyone who saw that overwhelming display of power would be in awe. It's a bit frustrating, but the military always seems to be showing off its power."
"What's frustrating about it?" I asked with unease.
Asagao nonchalantly tilted her head. "Well at this rate, I won't be able to win against Natsume in the elections."
"What??? You… you want to participate in the elections?"
She can't be serious… It's always been customary for the head and the subhead to come from the military elites. This way, the new leaders would be accepted by even the stupidest of idiots. After all, with so many idiots in the military, having the most powerful fighters on top was the only way to maintain any sort of organizational hierarchy.
I continued, trying to speak as lightheartedly as possible. "I mean, isn't it impossible? The election's probably rigged for Natsume anyway. I bet they just pretend to have an election…"
Asagao was dead serious. "Even if it's impossible," she said softly as she looked straight at me, "I'm doing it. That's what I have decided."
When people tried to act tough, many would just end up being all talk. They would try to create an intricate web of lies to prevent others from finding out about their empty words. I'm sure there were many idiots in the military who did this, and I'm sure they constantly lied to keep up their false bravado.
However, Asagao was different. She may have spoken her words softly, but her eyes looked as serious as ever. She was not the type of person to joke about this kind of thing, as she truly believed in it from the bottom of her heart. That's why she spoke so softly— she was smart enough to know that it would be a long and arduous task. Her voice may have trembled a bit as well, but at least her words were full of conviction. And, those were definitely not empty words.
"I guess so…" I thought to myself. Honestly, I couldn't think of a proper response. It was easy enough to encourage, make fun, or go against her, but

none of those seemed appropriate. Most importantly, she definitely did not want to hear any of those things. So, I just stared straight at her without saying a word, and the room quickly turned silent.
Suddenly, the security lock beeped once again, and we both instinctively looked at the door. As we did, we saw Renge struggling as she tried to carry a big plant into the room. She had on a backpack, and the plant she was trying to carry was as tall as her. On top of that, the plant had a thick trunk, and its branches stretched out considerably. I noticed that there were numerous apple-like fruit hanging off of it as well.
Surprisingly enough, after a bit of difficulty, Renge managed to carry the entire thing into the office. She sighed and wiped her forehead after doing so.
“Woah, Kasumi?” she said as soon as she saw me. She waved.
“O-Oh, yeah…You’re still here?”
Renge gave me a smile. “Yeah,” she said, nodding cheerfully. “I was just at the lab.” With a grunt, she picked up the plant again and plopped it down in front of Asagao. She rummaged through her backpack and pulled out an apple.
“I wanted you to try it,” she said as she handed the apple to Asagao. “Here you go!”
“Thanks,” said Asagao. She carefully took the apple and started to examine it. “Hmm… The color and shape looks good. But I need to check its taste…”
“Okay!,” nodded Renge, “I’ll cut it now.” She took out a pinafore apron out of her backpack and quickly wore it on top of her school uniform. She grabbed the ends of the apron and began to put apples onto it. When she was done, she headed to the office kitchen, but stopped right in front of me and said, “U-Umm, Kasumi? Did you want one too? I’ll also some tea….”
Illustration
“Ah, is it okay?” I asked. I’d imagine that the apple probably wasn’t a new product they were rolling out. If it was, I wouldn’t be allowed to touch it, much less try it. I glanced at Asagao for her approval.
She gave me a nod. “We needed a taster anyway,” she said as she fidgeted with the apple. “I don’t mind either way.”
“Okay then, sure,” I said, nodding at Renge.
She wrapped her apron even tighter around the apples. The apples looked like were about to spill out, but she squeezed even harder and lifted the apron even higher to prevent them from doing so. “Alright, leave it to me!” she exclaimed as she disappeared into the office kitchen. Her apron, now filled with apples, swayed around as she walked.
“♪May we be blessed with its flavor♪,” she began to sing, albeit out of tune. “♪Apples are the forbidden, for~bid~den~ fruit♪, ♪so they’re sweet♪, ♪so they’re sour♪, ♪they’re sweet and sour! ♪”
“The hell kind of song is that?” I thought to myself. Her song was so out of place that I sneaked a peak into the kitchen, and saw her humming softly to herself as she held a kitchen knife. Clearly, she was in a good mood. She

quickly cut out the core and peeled the apple. Her singing may have been a bit off, but her skill in the kitchen was right on.
“♪And the apples go round and round♪. ♪You can’t escape from us♪,” she continued to sing. “♪In just the blink of an eye♪… You’re done!” She brandished the knife and swung down hard on the apple. She put the slices on the plate, and soon they began to pile up. She then boiled some water for the tea.
Seeing that, I returned back to my desk. For some reason, I felt like I just witnessed something amazing. “Wow those apples…” I said in awe as I unconsciously looked at Asagao, “they’re amazing, right?”
“Hehehe,” she smugly laughed. “You don’t know the half of it.”
“Huh…” But I wondered whether or not Renge thought the apples were amazing as well. After all, she was surprisingly in high spirits. Actually, was it because she was always energetic and happy? Or maybe it’s because I said I would be down to eat some? No way, that can’t be it… I’m probably just overthinking things. I glanced confusingly at Asagao.
“Of course the apples are amazing!” she said triumphantly as she crossed her arms. “They are a cut above the rest! Actually not just the apples, everything produced here is just on a whole new level!”
“I-I see…” I muttered. I wondered how they produced such foods in the local plants, but all I got in response was Asagao’s smug smile. “Now *that’s* a smile I want to protect,” I thought to myself.
“Those apples were developed by me and Renge,” said Asagao as she blushed a bit. She looked at me with pride, almost like the look parents would give when bragging about their children. But suddenly, she cleared her throat. “They’re my… weapons,” she said uncomfortably.
“Huh… weapons you say,” I said. I jokingly imagined the apples being thrown at the enemies. I mean, technically with enough power, it could be lethal.
Asagao smiled. “Well, you’ll understand once you eat it.”
“S-Sure…”
Asagao was always confident about the things she said, but she sounded much more confident than usual when talking about the apples. She did rise to the top from her development skills alone, so it’s not like her confidence was misplaced. But just how good would the apples have to be for her to be this proud of them?
“It’s done!” shouted Renge, pushing a tea cart out of the kitchen. The cart rattled as she pushed it next to our table. She lined the plates up and started to make some black tea. “Here you go!”
Asagao and I moved closer to the table. The aroma from the black tea started to mix with the apples, and as a result, it smelled a bit like apple tea. It only grew stronger as I moved closer to the plate.
“Well then, here I go,” I said, breathing a sigh of relief. I took a slice and popped it in my mouth. Instantly, I tasted its sweetness, and its beautiful

aroma soon filled the air around me. The more I bit into the slice, the more its juices started to flow out. “Woah, it’s so sweet and juicy!”
That slice was probably the sweetest thing I have ever tasted in my entire life. Compared to regular apples, this one was like the next generation fruit. Actually, it’s so good it could be the generation after that. Kind of like an apple 3.0? In any case, if our manufacturing branch could make this, then that’s actually so impressive…
Renge trembled with excitement. “I know right?? And look here! The apples here are sour, you know!” She took the other plate of apples and stabbed a fork into one of the slices. “Here you go!” she said as she tried to feed me the slice.
“Ah! No I’m good…”
Renge would have none of it. Once again, she offered it to me. “C’mon!” she playfully said. “Just eat it!”
I took a closer look at her and was instantly mesmerized. Her long, slender fingers delicately clung onto the fork. Her pleading eyes stared straight up into mine, and her seductive lips gave off a certain allure. All this combined with her charming voice was more than enough to draw me in. But, Asagao soon cleared her throat, and I quickly returned to my senses.
“Ah, no it’s really okay,” I murmured. “I don’t really like sour stuff, so… I mean I like sweet stuff a lot more, so like, you know!” I laughed a bit to lighten up the tension.
“But it’s so good…” pleaded Renge as she puffed up her cheeks. She was clearly not satisfied with my answer.
Asagao was a bit drawn back as well. “What kind of excuse is that…”
Renge, now discouraged, offered the piece to Asagao instead. “Here you go, Asagao!” she said as she tried the same thing with her.
“No thanks, I’m good…” responded Asagao as she motioned a no thank you. But, Renge was even more stubborn this time. “Come on, eat it!”
“F-Fine…” Against Renge’s pleading voice, Asagao had no choice but to comply. She sighed, and reluctantly ate the slice. “Well, this one is also not bad,” she said after eating it.
“Thank goodness,” said Renge, relieved. She grinned happily at Asagao, and Asagao’s face soon turned as red as the apples she just had. She quickly turned away to hide her embarrassment.
“This one is doable,” she finally said, nodding.
“What do you mean by doable…” I asked. I really had no idea what she meant.
However, Asagao just walked back to the desk without answering me. She took out some sort of spray bottle and squatted down next to the plant that Renge had brought in earlier. “Lemme take a look at this plant,” she said. She held the spray arms-length away from her and pointed it at the plant.
This was no ordinary spray. Mysterious crystals floated within the bottle. These crystals resonated with the <World> within us, and functioned as an output device for our powers. It is said that the dreams we saw in our cold

sleep caused our powers to manifest, so by recreating the <World> we dreamed about, these devices could materialize our powers into the real world. Depending on the device, our powers could also be amplified to great extents.
In a sense, <Worlds> represented our very own desires. After all, these <Worlds> weren't something that just *happened* to appear in our dreams. No, these <Worlds> were *created* by us alone, forged by our imaginations. They stood for what we wanted in life and were phenomena that could only be described as miracles.
The fact that she brought this out meant only one thing— that she was about to use her <World>.
Just what kind of <World> did she possess?

Asagao gently touched the plant with one hand and closed her eyes. She then touched the back of her neck. It was an odd pose, but perhaps this was her way of strengthening her visualization so her powers could flow smoothly onto the Qualidea Code.
"Speak to me," she whispered as she sprayed the plant. As she did, the crystals shone brightly and colorfully, and the sparkling mist gently fell onto the plant. Its many leaves seemed to shiver as a result.
"Ah, I see," said Asagao, smiling happily. "These children really love Renge, and they will respect her wishes!"
"What do you mean 'these children'… that's a bit scary, you know," I muttered. A chill went up my spine. I mean, she *was* saying some weird stuff.
Asagao glared at me. "Can't you tell? My <World> lets me talk to the plant!"
"Oh I see," I said. So there were <Worlds> like that, huh? What an ideal power for the manufacturing branch. I could see why she was not suited for the military at all, then. After all, most <Worlds> in the military revolved around strong offensive or defensive powers.
"Thank goodness," said Renge, relieved. She patted herself on the chest. "Looks like it was worth talking to them every day!"
"Well, the manufacturing branch can really put your <World> to good use, Renge," said Asagao. "I really wish the process was faster so you can officially be a part of us."
"What?" I asked. Suddenly, we were talking about Renge's <World>. I looked at both of them closely.
"U-Umm.. my <World>, you see," answered Renge. She was embarrassed and fidgeted with her hair a little bit. "Through my words, I get things to like me, I think? Like that plant… Something like that, you know? It's like a lesser version of Asagao's powers, or err…"
Woah… there were powers like that too? Even though we've been a sniper-spotter pair, I didn't know about this at all. But now it all made sense. Asagao was able to converse with things, but Renge was only able to call

out to them. Seeing that Renge could only talk but not hear, her <World> was indeed a step below Asagao's. However, both were certainly suited for this branch.
"In other words, something along the lines of you talking to water to make it sparkle more? Or something like that?" I asked. I tried to see if I got a good grasp on what her <World> really was.
Renge looked troubled. "S-Sure. Something like that, right?"
"Not even close," snapped Asagao. "What kind of pseudoscience is that? Sounds like something from a cult."
"I mean, we are talking about people who could talk to plants," I said. In any case, <Worlds> weren't something that could be explained from the laws of physics alone. There could have been someone who saw a <World> where talking to water made it sparkle more, right? I was going to go on more about it, but Asagao looked angry, so I wisely shut my mouth.
But then, Renge started to talk. "Well, you know, I just give the fruits some ~get sweeter~ chants," she said nodding. "Once I do that, they start working harder!"
"O-Ohh.." I murmured. Somehow this all sounded vaguely familiar, so I thought hard about where I would have heard something like that. "Ah!" I exclaimed as I finally remembered. "Kind of like those chants they do at the maid cafes right?"
Renge froze up. "Huh?" she asked softly.
"What are you talking about?" said Asagao as she drew back in disgust.
"It's something that happened long ago when we still had maid cafes," I tried to explain. "You know, the maids who would dress up all nicely and try to please the customers. When they served food, they would chant something like that and even do some poses to go along with it. It's a real delightful moment, I've heard…"
What was I saying? I may have said all that, but honestly I didn't understand why people did that sort of thing. I was literally just repeating what I read as a little kid. Why did our ancestors do such a thing?
Asagao looked disgusted at first, but suddenly clapped her hands together in satisfaction. "In other words, it's some sort of entertainment niche to help generate more business revenue?"
"Well something like that I guess," I said. "Not really, though… Hmmm, how do I explain this?"
"You can do it, Kasumi!" said Renge. "I trust in your explanations!"
She was very encouraging, but I really didn't feel like explaining the concept of a maid cafe in detail. If I did do such a thing, Asagao would no doubt look at me in disgust.
Asagao was deep in thought. "I see, the entertainment industry sure did a lot of things, huh…" she muttered as she blew on the tea. She took a moment and then suddenly glanced at both me and Renge with a serious look. "Is it okay if I ask something?"

I knew what she was going to ask just from her tone alone— it was a tone I recognized. She was completely serious and sounded a bit shaky. Her voice was shaky not because of a lack of strength, but because she wasn't trying to pretend to be someone she wasn't.
"Does it have to do with the elections you were talking about earlier?" I asked. I knew her all too well.
Asagao twitched a little bit. "Yeah…" she replied as she stared intently at us. " I haven't told you yet, Renge, but I'm going to participate in the election."
"E-lec-tion?" asked Renge. She thought about it for a second, then happily nodded in acknowledgement. "But isn't Natsume the next city head?"
"She will be if there are no other candidates," said Asagao. "However if there is another candidate, then the election would be forced to an actual vote."
"Really??" asked Renge. "I thought they just decide the next city head among themselves."
Asagao shrugged and smiled bitterly. "Well, this sort of thing is unprecedented… It's never really been brought to a vote," she said. "But that doesn't mean the rules set long ago have been wiped clean."
She took out a tablet and showed us something on the screen. On it was Chiba's very own constitution. Of course, there was a section in it that explained how the next city head should be determined— through elections. Strictly speaking, elections were something unique to Chiba and Chiba alone. The other cities used city-wide battle rankings to determine their heads and subheads. Occasionally, they were also determined by recommendations from their fellow peers. However, when the three cities were first formed, Chiba was the weakest in terms of military strength, so that's probably why they chose a different way to select the leaders. Unfortunately, Chiba did pretty much end up doing the exact same thing as the other two cities. Our elections were really just there for show.
"The other cities just use their number one and number two fighters as the leaders," continued Asagao. "Kanagawa's had the same leader for almost 10 years now. It's almost a dictatorship at that point, huh… Well it's not like we're much different from them anyway…"
Asagao was sure knowledgeable about the other cities, most likely because she often did business with them.
"If you say it that way, Chiba is surprisingly democratic," I noted.
"Of course!" shouted Asagao triumphantly. "We aren't muscleheads like those Kanagawa peeps, or those cocky idiots from Tokyo! We are free and democratic!"
"Is that so…" said Renge, confused.
"Well, it really stemmed from the olden days when we were mostly farmers," I said. "We were prone to uprisings during that time, so the leaders really pushed for the idea of self-sacrifice."
"O-Ohhh!" exclaimed Renge.

“…That’s why we have a different mentality out of all the cities.”
Renge nodded and lightly smiled. “I see…”
“You sure are knowledgeable about Chiba…” said Asagao. “What, you like Chiba that much?”
“You’re the last person I want to hear that from… There’s no way anyone can like Chiba more than you.”
Asagao turned away and blushed a bit. “I guess you can say that…”
“Definitely,” I said jokingly. “Otherwise, you wouldn’t try to be the city head without even being in the military, right?”
“Yeah…” sternly said Asagao. She didn’t realize I was just playing with her.
“That’s why I’m going to be in charge and start changing this city from the inside. Especially for us.”
“For us?” asked Renge. She was a bit overwhelmed by Asagao’s seriousness.
“Us as in the non-military branches. We’re just as important!”
I’ve heard Asagao say this so many times before, but every time I’m dumbfounded by her determination. After all, the only person who could say this was her, I think. We were in an age where our worth was determined by our strength alone. To us, nothing else mattered other than fighting on the battlefield, so we wanted nothing but more power to fight. To change all this was certainly impossible to do.
Renge also thought the same way. Both of us couldn’t comprehend how Asagao could say such things and believe so much into it. Perhaps it was because we were originally from the military, but we viewed things much differently than Asagao. No matter how many times we were transferred, we always believed that since we were constantly fighting to survive, the military would no doubt always be the most important branch.
“Kasumi. In that battle you got points for your one kill, right?” she continued, interrupting my thoughts. “What would you have to do in here to obtain that same number of points?”
“It was an Ogre class, huh…” said Renge. She started whispering to herself as she counted. “One, two, three…”
I didn’t need to count to know the answer. After all, one kill was pretty much my average kill count when I fought in the past. “All in all, about half a month of work,” I replied, “which roughly translates to finding 10 new clients.”
“Wow…” said Renge as she turned pale. She was still in the midst of counting it all out.
“You see?” said Asagao as she shook her head. “This city… no, this world has its priorities all messed up. It’s not only this branch too. We should focus on other branches as well!”
“But we are in a war though…” said Renge. “Focusing on the military is only natural, right?”
“That is true,” answered Asagao calmly. “But battles aren’t won just from the soldiers alone. There’s so much support that goes on behind the scenes.

Like, this manufacturing branch and the supply branch both work together to directly supply everything to them. Of course, the trade branch runs the city economically, and without it, we would lack funding for any sort of development. Even the engineers who designed everything, from the weapons to the houses, contributed greatly to this city. Besides, we're not going to get our old glory back *just* from fighting…"
She wasn't wrong. Right now, because of our powers, we were more than capable of taking down the <Unknowns>. If we were in the same situation as thirty years ago when we didn't have our powers, it would be absolutely correct to focus everything on the military. But because of our <Worlds>, fighting and killing the <Unknowns> became an everyday routine for us. What we really needed was to rebuild what we had lost, and not spend all our time wiping out the <Unknowns>. Besides, it's not like we knew how many of them were out there, anyway. We could be fighting for a very long time.
All in all, I could see why she was so upset about the current state of things. Renge nodded convincingly as well. It seemed like she was on board.
"Of course, it's not like the military's in the wrong," said Asagao as she smiled lightly at us. She calmed down a bit. "But still, I want to change it, even if it's just a little bit. I want a city where *all* of our work is fairly compensated…"
She spoke without hesitation, and her voice was as pure as can be. She then grabbed Renge's hand and said, "That's why, I want your help, Renge…"
Renge just looked at Asagao's tender hands. "I'm not too quick at understanding things…" she said softly. "So if you win this election, you'll be the city head?"
"That's right."
Renge looked up and just stared straight at her without saying a word.
"Like I've said before," continued Asagao as she stared straight back at Renge, "the point system is heavily in favor of the military branch, so I want to change that. If I can get all the support from the non-military branches, I could almost have 90% of the votes."
"Isn't that too optimistic? It can't be that easy," I said. Even the most curious of people were afraid of change, and even more so when this sort of thing had never been done before. On top of that, we had been in war for far too long— the notion of the military reigning supreme had already been carved into our heads. To change this idea was definitely no easy task. Furthermore, there were definitely many powerful military leaders who enjoyed abusing their powers. A lot of influence and support was needed to even stand a chance against them.
"I know, I know. In the end, I may as well be dreaming," she said reluctantly. "But I do have some good connections as the head of the branch, and plus, I could get even more support from other influential leaders. One way or another, I *will* have my support. I don't care if I have to make some shady deals or even force them to support me."

Well, I guess she was right. The manufacturing branch single-handedly handled all the food production for the three cities. As a result, she could threaten to cut down or even stop supplies to certain areas. With all this influence in hand, she could negotiate her support in the election. That being said, she didn't do that because it could harbor animosity towards her and her branch.
Asagao's greatest weapon in this election was no doubt her position as the head of the manufacturing branch. She had full control over which products were being developed and supplied. Many leaders and influential people knew that if she wanted to stop the supplies of certain products, the effects would be devastating for them.
"Well, it's not like people's lives can get any worse…" I said.
"So you do get it."
"I mean, for me personally, I've had nothing but unpleasant experiences after being transferred from the military," I said. As a soldier, I was allowed to laze around on the battlefield, but why did I have to work so hard in this branch?
"I guess so. But the real issue at hand is—"
"Campaigning, right?" I interrupted.
Asagao stared at me and blinked a few times. "Wow, I'm surprised. You're pretty smart for someone who was from the military."
"Thanks…" I said begrudgingly. How lowly did she think of me?
People's low standard of living was actually a great advantage. Before the election, all she had to do was just campaign a bit and promise some good things for everyone. If she did that, then people would no doubt flock to her, given her status. For example, to get the boys' vote, she could campaign to get more food for them. At Chiba's current state, it really didn't take much to influence the people.
"Yes, indeed. I could spread my ideas and obtain more allies through campaigning. With that, I'll have a chance in this election," said Asagao. She glanced at Renge and continued. "That's why I need your help, Renge. I want you to be with me when I go to people and announce my candidacy. I also need you to be there when I do my campaign speeches."
"C-Campaign speeches?" asked Renge.
"You know, speeches where you kind of lay out what you are going to do as the city head," I said.
"Exactly," said Asagao. "Originally, they were used to help get more voters. But, since the military branch pretty much decided the next leaders, they sort of became speeches about their policies instead. You could also say that those speeches are used to announce the subhead as well. Remember Natsume's speech?"
"S-Subhead??" frantically exclaimed Renge. "You mean… you want to announce me as your subhead?!?"

Asagao bit her lip. “Well, we don’t know that for sure… There are a lot of things that need to be done first. But that’s about how much help I need from you!”
“Don’t try to lie… You know you want her as your subhead,” I thought. In any case, if Renge was subhead, that meant that Asagao had to win the election first. On the off chance that she did win, I’m sure that would be enough to convince Renge to do it.
“I see…” I said. “Renge’s not too bad a pick, I think.”
Renge laughed embarrassingly. “Y-You r-really think so?”
“Yeah,” I said, nodding. “The fact that you were originally from the military is a big plus too. That way, you both can appeal to all the branches—including the military one.”
“I see… But if it’s like that, I feel a bit used…” her voice trailed off. Her joyful demeanor earlier disappeared, and she looked at Asagao with unease.
Asagao stared straight back. “I won’t deny that I haven’t thought of that. Though, above all, I value your social skills. You’re also doing really well developing things with me… It makes you ideal for me, right?”
“O-Oh, if you put it that way, then o-okay, sure,” nodded Renge. “I don’t know if it’s doable for me though, but I’ll do my best!”
“Thanks…” said Asagao, breathing a sigh of relief. She grabbed onto Renge’s hand one more time and turned to me. “Also Kasumi, I need your skills to help get me the majority vote. You’re good at that kind of stuff, right?”
“Skills? I don’t have any skills like that…”
“Yeah you do,” she said firmly. “You always say what’s necessary to confuse and trick others. That shady way of talking… I like it, you know.”
“Shady, huh?” I said. I guess I couldn’t deny it.
“That’s why I got a few tricks up my sleeve,” continued Asagao, as she fidgeted around with the apple on her hand. It seemed this was her way of fighting.
“I see… I’ll hear you out for now. But this can’t be all the apples you have, can it?”
“Oh, there’s definitely more!” she shouted as she smiled with confidence. These apples were probably her greatest products to date. Just how many did she produce?
“Alright, then. I know you already know this, but I can’t just magically give you the majority,” I said. “Besides, I’m not even that good at dealing with others.”
Asagao stared blankly. “I guess so. I figured as much working with you here… But if we can work towards that goal…”
From the tone of her voice, it was obvious that she was indirectly asking whether I would help her or not.
“Well hold on, it’s not like I’m completely on board yet,” I said lightheartedly. I wasn’t good at smiling, but I somehow managed to squeeze one out.

Asagao straightened up and paused a bit. “Kasumi, I respect you a lot. But as long as you’re here, you’ll have a very hard time moving up the ranks. I’ll change that system so that we can have that opportunity, even in this branch. By doing so, we can even negotiate with moving inland and other stuff like that.”
“… You’re usually more convincing than that.” I said after a long pause. I took a quick look at her. This couldn’t have been all the things she wanted to say.
“What—” she paused halfway. She fidgeted her hair around and sighed deeply. “T-That’s why I really want you to help me out…” she said with a pout. Her normally sharp eyes grew wide, and her cheeks turned red as she looked up to me. Her words may not have been very convincing, but her face was. There was no way anyone could say no to that, including me.
“Alright, alright. I’ll do it.”
“Thanks…” she said softly. She breathed another sigh of relief and flashed a smile. “With this, I can win my battle…”
“Battle? You mean the battle against the <Unknowns>?” said Renge.
Asagao shook her head. “My enemies aren’t the <Unknowns>, but rather, the humans. This is a battle only I can do… I’ll win this, but not with guns. Figuring out exactly how people think and using that to our advantage… now *that* takes a different type of weapon.”
Her words sparked a memory within me. It was the girl… she also said things like that. I felt like maybe she had done something similar to me… perhaps she had broken me down mentally or something like that. Thanks to that though, I had a strong mental fortitude. For better or for worse, no matter how grim a situation got, I was able to just shrug it aside.
“You know, that’s not a bad way to see things,” I said after reminiscing for a while, “and definitely not the first time I’ve heard such a thing.”
Asagao was ecstatic to hear it. “I know, right? The real battles aren’t won through brute strength!”
There was some truth to her words, so I nodded in agreement.
“Time to show them what we’ve got!” she shouted. To me though, it sounded oddly similar to the shouts from the military…

It’s been decided, then.
“It’s only going to get busier from here!” Asagao said earlier. “First we need to increase our appeal! I’ll leave that up to you, Kasumi!”
And just like that, I had more work to do. She gave me such a vague task too… I guess I had evaluate different campaign strategies and come up with the one that would give her the most votes. Well, this surely wasn’t something that could be done overnight. I took out my tablet and headed back to my dorm.
The sun had set long ago, so it was well into the night. As such, the town was eerily quiet, and my dorm was no different. I didn’t hear a thing— there were no voices, no sounds… just silence. I slowly crept to my room, hoping

not to wake anyone up. Finally, with just a touch from my hand, my door automatically opened up. It was a small, two room apartment, but it was *my* home. I tiptoed in, and at last, I was finally back.
The lights were still on inside my apartment, and I could hear someone from the dining room. It was my sister, Asuha.
“Welcome back~”, she said as she peeked at me through the dining room door.
“A-Ah… thanks,” I muttered. That’s odd, why was she here? I looked at her suspiciously. Her dorm was separate from mine— she lived with the other middle school girls and I lived in the military housing unit.
“I just thought it’d be nice to visit once in a while,” she said before I could ask anything. Her hair, smelling faintly of shampoo, was a little damp, so the usual fuzziness wasn’t there. With the help of a hair band, it flowed nicely down her shoulders. “You’re a bit late, though…” she added.
“Well, it’s always like this,” I responded as I headed towards the dining room. Asuha didn’t bother to close the door when she peeked through, so I just slipped through the crack. I dropped my bag on the floor and jumped onto the sofa. At last, I can finally relax… I closed my eyes and breathed out a sigh of relief.
“Good work today,” said Asuha as she lightly pressed a cold can of coffee against my forehead. “Here… ”
“O-Oh, thanks,” I said, grabbing it. I popped it open and took a sip. That tiny sip filled my mouth with this unbelievable sweet taste, and as I gulped it down, the even sweeter aftertaste of the condensed milk lingered onwards. I recognized this taste— it was Max Coffee! For some reason, the manufacturing plants around here prioritized the production of this caramel-colored drink.
To the people in Chiba, this was nothing more than a mere soft drink, but as I drank more, I could feel its caffeine working on my body. It was sweet… way too sweet for my liking. I wonder if this sweetness was something added by Asagao herself. Perhaps she thought this would appeal to the consumers more.
Lost in my own thoughts, I opened my eyes once again and turned towards Asuha. She was wearing light pink underwear, and a bath towel was wrapped around her upper body. A bit of water dripped down her pure skin, so pure in fact that it was slightly dyed red from her blood underneath. From the looks of it, it seemed she just showered.
Illustration
This was my house, and she was my sister, so I wasn’t bothered by the way she dressed. But I did wish that she would have dressed more modestly, even if I was the only other person here.
“You sure came back late today,” she said as she dried herself with the towel and adjusted her hairband. She popped open a can of coffee and took a sip. Looking satisfied, she then wiped her lips with her fingers. “Work?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Since I had to meet with the military… you know… everything was pushed back.”
“You sound super funny when you talk about your work,” she said with a smile. “It’s hilarious.”
She sure spoke bluntly and maybe sounded a little apathetic, but I knew she harbored no ill will. She really did talk like me, I think… But, even if we both talked like that, we were still able to converse properly. In fact, we talked more here than we did earlier in the day.
“Nah, it’s not hilarious,” I said. “I’m just a normal person talking about my normal work. Out of curiosity though… why did you have to be so cold earlier??”
I was worried that something might have happened to her since she was acting so unpleasant during the meeting. In response, Asuha just shrugged her shoulders and groaned a bit.
“…C-Cuz it’s embarrassing when you’re with me…” she whispered as she quickly looked away.
“Is that something you can say when you’re in your underwear?” I joked lightheartedly. “Where’s your shame in that? Also, it kinda sounds like you’re embarrassed to have a brother…”
I mean, I could kind of understand where she’s coming from. She was an elite and I was a dropout. I wasn’t exactly the shining example of a perfect big brother. But still…
“W-What?” she exclaimed as she waved her hands around. “N-No… I mean, you’re pretty embarrassing, but it’s just that when I’m seen with you it’s kinda… weird, you know…?”
“Oh… I get that I’m embarrassing, but there’s nothing weird about us being seen together, okay? Now hurry up and put some clothes on…”
“Okay, okay,” replied Asuha. She grabbed her holster from the sofa and wrapped it around her thigh.
I just stared at her. Was that what girls usually put on first? Or was that something only she did? In any case, I understood her words well. Before I entered the cold sleep, I remembered being very embarrassed and awkward when I was with my mother. To be fair though, my mother was honestly a weird person, especially when she was in front of other people…
Plus, I’m pretty sure Asuha was in her rebellious stage. I know I was, when I was her age back in the day. Despite that, she’ll grow up, just like I did…
She’ll grow up, huh? I got emotional just thinking about it… Her breasts especially needed a lot of growing up to do…
Asuha loosely threw on a pastel-colored hoodie and put on some short pants, an outfit similar to what she probably wore at home. She then jumped on the sofa next to me, took out her phone, and stretched out her long, but thin legs. After a while of lazing around, she started to hum as she played with her phone. She was using her phone just like how she usually did in public, but right now, she seemed to act a bit differently. Actually, I guess it’d be more accurate to say that I viewed her differently in public. In

fact, I pretty much treated her as if she was a different person. By doing so, I could feel much closer to her here at home.
Other people probably saw Asuha much differently than I did. To them, Asuha's probably only just a cute little girl, but to me, she's *my* cute little sister. She's seen as a cute girl either way, but because I'm her older brother, I had a unique sibling bond with her.
Some people, however, didn't see Asuha in such a positive light. Even if she was cute, it wasn't surprising that she was hated by many. Take black-eyes, for example. From what I saw, she was sick of Asuha's constant bratty and apathetic attitude, and she sure made it clear that she did not like Asuha at all. I'm sure black-eyes wasn't the only one that hated her, and that concerned me.
"By the way, I don't mind it, but do you act like that around Natsume too? Since you're always around the punks?"
"I don't know, maybe…" said Asuha, annoyed. She buried her head into the cushion and sighed.
"Even though I rarely talk to her, Natsume's a good person. She always praises you as well… Why don't you try to be closer to her…?"
I wanted to add "even if you just tried to fake it," but decided not to in the end. I thought it would be too arrogant of me to suggest something that I was unable to do myself.
Asuha just sighed once again, perhaps noticing my hesitation. "Nah, you got it super wrong, man. Girls don't just simply compliment other girls… they usually have something else in mind…" she said. She turned back face up and gave me a smug smile.
"Natusme is pretty sly," Asuha continued. "When she's complimenting me, she's really saying that I'm beneath her. She doesn't even try hiding it, too."
I was taken aback. "Really? Wow, girls are really scary… Don't say any more though, I don't want to get in on all this gossip."
"You got issues if you think this is gossip," said Asuha as she hugged her own knees and laughed. Then, as if she remembered something important, she jumped up and sat cross-legged on the couch. "Ah, that reminds me. Today was the first time I saw you working, you know."
"Err… You know that we were together in the military branch, right?" I interjected. "That counts as working, right?"
"Does it?"
Yes, yes it does… And don't say that with such a serious face… I stared back at her, and our eyes met.
Asuha continued to stare at me for a bit, but then she smiled. "Well, how do I put it… Like, it was the first time seeing you work from the manufacturing branch, you know?"
She raised her finger and lit it on fire, making it glow brightly, albeit faintly. This was no doubt her <World>, just on a very, very small scale. Because the power output was so minimal, she didn't need the help of any

equipment. She made the flame burn a bit more, and then using her finger as an iron, she slowly curled her hair.
“Maybe, like… relieved? Something like that,” she said after drying her hair.
“Relieved? Oh…” I sighed.
Asuha blew out the fire on her finger, and her beautiful reddish-brown hair gently fell on her shoulders. “Yeah… you aren’t really suited for the military,” she said. “Cuz you know, you are like, super weak.”
“I guess so… Sorry for being so weak and worrying you…” I said reluctantly. There was no way I could refute anything she just said.
Asuha shook her head. “No, no… it’s not like I’m worried about you or anything…”
“Can you then? Can you worry about me once in a while?”
“I guess…” she said as she looked directly in my eyes. She cleared her throat. “I’m more worried about how you’ll do if I go inland…”
“Oh…” my voice trailed off softly. Inland was a place reserved only for people with exceptional results. People in the top of the rankings or in prestigious positions, like the city head and subhead, had the privilege to transfer inland. In other words, transferring inland meant transferring to the heart of the cities’ government. It was said to be the best reward that people could get.
All the previous heads and subheads pretty much went inland, and Asuha was on track to do the same. If things kept going the way they were, Asuha would no doubt be transferred much earlier than me. Of course, her going inland meant that we would no longer be together anymore.
In any case, the chances of me being transferred were ridiculously low. I earned a measly amount of points back in the military, and now I’m earning even less than that. At this rate, I’ll probably never reach the points necessary for the transfer privilege. There was the possibility of being transferred after I completed my service, but even if that happened, I’d still be very lowly ranked. Even then, it would be difficult to live with my sister—she was just on a whole new level.
That being said, one day I will go inland with my sister. We would live there peacefully and quietly without having to fight another battle. Yes, this was definitely much easier said than done; I was no one special, and I knew more than anyone how useless I really was. That’s why I pushed myself to even join the military. Despite that, I ironically ended up in the manufacturing branch, and became no different than the vegetables I now helped produce. Unable to find any self-worth myself, I desperately clung on to the ground to maintain my role in society.
I was sure I wasn’t the only one who was like that. Even if people served under the greatest, most powerful princesses of all time, or even if they were the elites among elites, they would only get a sense of accomplishment or self-worth if other people told them so. Every single one of them lived by desperately clinging on to anything that made them useful. Their self-worth

relied completely on others, and they had no choice but to find meaning in their lives through fulfilling their respective roles in society.
However, my sister Asuha was truly a special case. She not only didn't conform to the norms of society, she almost seemed above it. What she did and what she could do were unique to her and her alone. There was no one else in the world like my sister.
That's why, if I were to fulfill my dreams of living together with my sister, I would have no choice but to rely on her.
"Don't worry about me," I said. "I'll manage somehow."
Asuha just laughed playfully. "Well, I am worried," she said teasingly. "You can't get any points at all. That's why I gotta take care of you even when we are like super old, you know? I'm kinda worried about that."
"Well…"
I smiled bitterly at Asuha and she just snickered a little bit. She wasn't wrong, though… Hmm… I wondered what kind of pension plans this city had. I had to start saving now, for sure…
I tilted my head upwards and just stared at the ceiling. Thinking about the future made me a little depressed, but I soon felt Asuha tug lightly on my sleeve. As I sluggishly turned to her, she quickly looked away.
"Well, you know…" she muttered softly as she fidgeted with her hair. "If it comes to that, I don't mind helping you till the very end… since I'm your sister…"
I saw her blush slightly and just smiled at her. "It'll be okay. I'll think of something."
So I said, but I didn't have anything ambitious or anything like that on my mind. But even so, there definitely had to be a way for us not to be separated in the future.
To be honest, I was a little excited— excited for the world Tsurube Asagao vowed to create. It was a vow that secretly brought me hope.

Chapter 5: A Utopia of Swimsuits and Fruits

Just what were our enemies?

I'm sure the people of this city -no, even this world- would agree that it would be the <Unknowns>. Seeing that they were an alien life form that almost drove us to extinction, there was no doubt that they were the clear answer to the question.

That being said, allow me to ask a different question.

Just what were our enemies?

Ask that again and the majority of the people would just stare back blankly. They would think that perhaps maybe they misheard the question, and in the end, they would give the exact same answer: The <Unknowns>. And of course, it would be a fine answer.

But, let me try throwing out another question to follow up.

Just what were our enemies?

Ask that again and some people would think that they were being made fun of, or maybe there were some ulterior motives for asking the same question three times in a row. They might get angry or just ignore the question altogether. Despite that, I'm sure the majority of people would answer it with the exact same answer once again. But would they really mean it?

The question "Just what were our enemies?" could be interpreted in many different ways. It's completely up each person to decide on which interpretation to take. So, if the question was repeated four, even five times, the meaning of it would begin to change a little depending on the person as more thought was put into it. People's answers would then diverge:

"It's the <Unknowns>… nothing else!"

"It's the militaries from the other cities that compete with us for rewards."

"No… The real enemy is from within."

"Wait a second… the real enemy is time. Time affects us all, and we can't go against it."

"It's literally everyone else. We are always competing for rewards, right?"

"I take my old answer back. Humanity itself is our worst enemy."

"Errr… I dunno."

"Sometimes it's our very own history that we must overcome."

"Our society can kind of be like an enemy, actually."

"Everything in this world is the enemy."

These answers weren't strange at all. In fact, many were probably right on the mark. Fundamentally, however, nobody realized one important thing.

Just what were our enemies?

I myself had a slightly different answer to that question. It was something so terrible that it would inevitably wipe out humanity one day, as it was easily capable of doing so. It was, without a doubt, much more threatening

than any other answer out there. Of all the evils in the world, this one was the worst of them all. In fact, no amount of good could go against it.
I'm talking, of course, about work. Humanity's mortal enemy was none other than work itself. *It's because of work* that we had to fight. *It's because of work* that we were given the order to annihilate all the <Unknowns>, and *it's because of work* that we had to obey those orders. *It's because of work* that we had to compete with each other for points, and *it's because of work* that we had to meet our quotas.
If we had not been given this work we called war, then we would have no enemies. Work itself established the enemy and dictated which enemies we needed to fight.
So with all that said, let's call work the enemy of all mankind. Naturally, the people at the top who allocated all this work weren't aware of this. I'm sure they thought that the work they assigned would have some impact on the world for better or for worse. There were some within them who strove for love and peace, and others who just simply loved giving out orders.
But, the many workaholics that served under them were different. For them, their very existence and purpose in life was all about work. The people fighting in the front lines and the people working in the very back all participated in this war because they were given a role, a role which ultimately came from work. Under the pretense of work, it even became okay for young students to fight against those that previously almost wiped out all of humanity.
If only work didn't exist, humanity would exist peacefully, and everything would be different. Perhaps I would run along the hills, chase some rabbits, and maybe go fishing. I would live in a small, but comfortable house, and eat good food all the time. In this utopia, it wouldn't be the ones who excelled in violence and deception that would be on top. No, the ones at the top would be those who lived life how it was meant to be lived— laid back and chill.
Every fault in this world lied with work. It robbed us of our personalities and was just detestable in general. Absolutely detestable.
With that hatred in mind, I worked overtime everyday trying to do the impossible. It had already been a few days since I tried to come up with a plan for the vague task that Asagao had given me. Somehow I had to "increase the appeal" of the manufacturing branch. Within that time, Urushibara got wind of this and gave me *plenty* of pep talks and words of "encouragement".
"It's almost the deadline, you know."
"Go home *after* you finish your work. Not before, after."
"Still at it?"
"Is it done?"
"Ughh…"
"If you got time to eat, keep on writing."
"Ughh… still?"

“Chigusa, if you don’t do your work, you’ll become pathetic— a shell of your former self. I do some field work, and my great work ethic positively influences the vegetables, you see.”
“You need to keep writing without breaks… You working for 22 hours and sleeping for 2 would be ideal, you know. This is no time to play around.”
Every. Single. Day. I would be pestered like this. I was good at ignoring things, but even I couldn’t completely shut it all out. Eventually I broke down a little… For three nights I couldn’t sleep at all. Perhaps it was because of the stress I accumulated from working too much, but my sleep quality went down the gutter. I would usually wake up after only sleeping two hours… I guess in the end, I was working all according to Urushibara’s “ideal” schedule. Everything could have been all according to his plan, actually… Was he secretly a master tactician?
Ultimately, my mind was plagued with the idea that if I was going to die from overworking, I was going to take him down with me. When would be a good time to do such a thing? I did feel a bit sorry for him though, because every day he quietly came back with new scars on his forehead, perhaps due to the *Sonic Stitches of Blood and Ashes* thingy he had to do.
All in all, that’s pretty much how my days went…
Days soon crawled by, and the day when we had to meet once again and discuss our plans finally arrived. It was the early morning, so I got some caffeine pills, energy drinks, and aspirin to help me get through the day. I even put wet sheet of papers on my forehead and neck, and rubbed some ointment beneath my eyes. Only after I finished all that was I able to continue typing on my keyboard.
Suddenly, I heard a weird laugh.
“K-Kasumi, are you alright?” asked Renge, having just came into the office. She handed me a cup of coffee.
I grabbed it and finished it in one gulp with all my remaining energy. I then put the cup back on the table and slammed down on the enter key.
“Thanks,” I said, exhausted. “It’s all done now so I’m fine now… I think…”
I turned to Renge and dropped my head down wearily. Looking dejected, I emailed the finished plans to Asagao and Urushibara, and simultaneously printed them out. With all this technology out there, why did I have to print them out too? Why did Urushibara have to get so mad when I didn’t print things out?
At last, I finished my preparations for the meeting. Just in time too, as Asagao and Urushibara walked in soon after.
“Kasumi, are you done with the plans?” said Asagao the moment she walked in.
I silently nodded and handed her the bundle of papers I just printed out.
“Thanks. I can see you’ve been working hard… Well then, let’s start the meeting, shall we?” she said as she smiled and pointed to the meeting room. Her voice was surprisingly soothing to my ears.

It was so soothing in fact that I let out a little chuckle, but quickly stopped as Renge and I followed them into the room. Renge took the papers and cheerfully handed them out, while the rest of us sat down.
“Can’t wait to see your plan!” said Asagao. She hummed as she started reading the papers, but stopped abruptly. “Kasumi… what is this?” she said with a shaky voice, pointing at one of the papers she was holding on to. On it, written in Comic Sans, was the following:
The new era of fruits have arrived! Fruits carefully selected from the manufacturing branch!
All new delicious fruits made exclusively from Chiba— the Chiba Fruit Collection! Find it in the Ryuuguujyou hot spring!
Dance with the sea breeze as you enjoy the new trends! Guaranteed love at first sight! ♪
I nodded in satisfaction. Yes, this was a good hook with a catchy follow up, wasn’t it?
“It’s the title of the plan,” I blurted out without thinking. I couldn’t think straight due to a lack of sleep.
In response, Urushibara just sighed deeply. “You know, Chigusa… You think this is some kind of fair? What the hell is this? You just playing around? You think you’re still in school?”
“Well, we are students, you know,” I thought. However, it just took one look at his very tired face for me to lose all the confidence I had earlier.
“I want an explanation for this too…” said a bewildered Asagao. Renge nodded as well.
Do I really have to explain all this? Somehow I thought they would be able to catch on. Well, I guess there’s no choice. It looked like I was going to have to explain everything.
“Nah, It’s what I thought up when working everyday…”
“Thought what up?”
“How I don’t want to work.…”
Asagao scowled. “O-Oh… you’re worse than I thought, you trash…”
“No, you got it all wrong…” I said. “See, I was thinking that maybe the people from the other branches were thinking the same thing. In fact, we should focus on that point and give the people what they really want. Only then can we get their support.”
The people who were not in the military branch worked without glory in this hellhole they called a workplace. I was sure they had enough of this never-ending war in their everyday lives and wanted a little peace for once. The idea of having fun without a care in the world would resonate deeply with them.
According to our ancestors, tired and exhausted people were told to relax at the beach. All the working people did, after all, dream of one thing: To go away from their workplace. It didn’t matter where, as long as it was in the opposite direction. Many would probably enjoy a trip to the hot-springs as they peacefully stared out into the sea.

That’s why I took their dreams and wishes, and packed it into this plan. By doing so, I came up with this Chiba Fruit Collection in Ryuuguujyou idea.
When talking about fruits, in many cases, the image of many tropical countries came to people’s mind. In the past, many resort hotels from these tropical countries gave out fruits to welcome the guests, because they gave the tourists a sense of welcome and relaxation. I wanted to bring that to Chiba.
With that being said, the presentation of this new lineup of fruits was crucial. By presenting them in a way that combined their great taste with the feel of a relaxing tropical resort, the people would get a great impression of not only the fruits themselves, but of our manufacturing branch as well. Theoretically speaking, of course.
“I think I’m getting the gist of it…” nodded Asagao as I finished explaining. “But this Ryuuguujyou hot spring… what is it?” She turned to page two of the plan and pointed at a conceptual render of the supposed place.
“Ah— that. I was rummaging through some old documents, and apparently there was a Kisarazu hot spring in the past. You know, the place where we had our battle. Before it became a battlefield, it was supposedly a very popular place to go to. I also read that the people at the top used tax money to host new-year conferences and stuff like that in it.”
“Hot springs huh?” said Renge, gazing happily at the render. “I’ve never been to such a place, though…”
The hot spring shown was indeed marvelous. As a whole, it had stone walls and featured open air baths that had a clear view to Tokyo Bay. On top of that, there were cozy hot tubs made from 18 karat gold. It had to be a truly extravagant place to be in.
Asagao was also mesmerized by the picture. She kept nodding in satisfaction, but soon had a confused look on her face. “Wait a second… new-year conferences were held in hot springs?”
“Yeah… it marked the beginning of work for the higher ups back in the day,” I said.
“Wow, really?” said Renge.
Asagao was not convinced. “I bet it was just an excuse for them to use government money…” she said restlessly. She was pessimistic, but in cases like these, it’s good to have a more objective point of view, right?
In any case, Urushibara was staring just as intently at one of the pictures. “Chigusa, I also have a question,” he said while raising his head. He pointed at the picture. “Is this also a hot spring?”
He was pointing at an image of an ocean spa. There was a garden terrace with an extraordinary view out to the open around it, and an LED water fountain stood tall within. It was truly a great place where guests could enjoy the water in their bathing suits.
I wasn’t surprised that Urushibara would notice this right away. He always went clubbing, and this sort of thing was right up his alley.

“Of course,” I said, nodding. “We will create this as well.” I took out a page from the plans that showed the indoor spa attractions— there was a big pool with an even bigger poolside. The room itself was illuminated, and lasers danced around the glass walls and ceilings. The whole image was almost like a scene out of a dream, as it even featured girls dancing happily dancing around in their swimsuits.
Urushibara took off his glasses and cleanly wiped his eyebrows. “Chigusa…” he said, staring intently at me.
“…Yes?” I said very softly in anticipation. What was he going to say? It worried me more than it should have.
“… Nice job.” He smiled. His white teeth contrasted with his darkish skin, and his scarred forehead twitched uncontrollably.
This was honestly the first time I’ve ever heard him compliment me. Wow, this was great to hear. If Urushibara liked it, then I was sure the other punks in the military would like it as well.
Even Asagao seemed to take notice. She took one look at Urushibara and said, “I guess if we do present all the fruits like this, then the other students would be drawn to it. But is this okay? Creating new facilities and stuff like that is sure to cost a lot just for this…”
She was not wrong. If we were to just present the new lineup normally, then the existing facilities would be more than enough. We had auditoriums that could fit all of the students in Chiba, and if needed, we had large, open plazas. But if we did that, we wouldn’t garner nearly enough attention. We needed to unveil the new products as flashily as possible, and that required something like a resort to do it in.
“Yeah, it’ll cost a lot, but it’s vital to this plan,” I said. “We need a place that can leave a lasting impression.”
“A good impression is something money alone can’t buy!” said Renge. She had on a smug smile and looked like she wanted to say more.
I waited a little bit to see if she really did want to, but in the end she didn’t. So, I continued speaking. “Plus, if you do manage to pull off this feat… It’ll speak volumes to the capabilities of you and the manufacturing branch, right?”
“I know that much, at least,” said Asagao as she stroked her chin.
I did the same. “We do have to keep in mind though that we can’t build this thing alone. We need the help of the trade and engineering branches, for example.”
“Yeah, the more money and resources we get, the more we can profit with the other branches,” said Asagao.
“Exactly. We just have to work with them to make sure everything goes according to plan and kinda guide them a bit,” I added, and paused for a bit. “… But, some branches will be troublesome for us.”
Asagao glanced at me. “The military branch, right?”
“Yeah. We need to make sure they can’t really interfere. If we can do that, we can get on better terms with the other branches.”

“I see,” nodded Asagao. “So I just need to lobby around the military branch…”
I glanced at Urushibara. He just sighed, and I didn’t know if he understood or not.
Renge shouted as she clapped her hands— perhaps she realized something. “I see! So that’s how we build such a big facility.”
“Well, the actual facility doesn’t have to be so big. We don’t even need to invite a lot of people.”
“Huh?” said Renge as she folder her hands together.
Even Urushibara was a bit surprised. “Woah, hold on a second, Chigusa,” he said with a sigh. “We need to show them the power of our branch. Considering that, we… Wait, hold on…”
“We use word of mouth,” interrupted Asagao, not giving a chance for Urushibara to finish his sentence.
“Exactly, it’s the only way that’s effective. We aren’t in the old days when we could just advertise to a bunch of people.”
In the past, advertising was easy. People could use televisions, radios, internet, magazines, and even newspapers to do it. However, barely any of that existed now. Instead, all that’s left was some makeshift SNS service that the students used, and putting ads in that would only irritate the users. It would thus be counterintuitive to advertise through that platform. Of course, there were still other mediums to use like billboards, flyers, and signs, but seeing that the target was the students, they didn’t seem that effective in drawing their attention.
On the other hand, word of mouth was completely different from the rest. We didn’t need to reach out to a lot of people, but rather, just a select few. In turn, their friends would notify more friends, and they would notify even more friends, and so on. Soon, we would have reached out to pretty much everyone.
“Is advertising through word of mouth that easy to do, though?” Renge asked with a blank look on her face. Her worry was warranted, but it was kind of funny to hear her say that, seeing how she had the best social skills out of all of us. That’s why we could use her skills to our advantage.
“Well, let’s see, Renge. What do you usually talk about with your friends?” I asked.
She clasped her hands together and thought about it for a while. “Hmmm… I guess anything that’s been particularly interesting? Like work related troubles? Or maybe people? Oh! Or like any good foods or stuff like that too!”
“I see,” I said. “So in other words, our normal conversations consist of things like pride, complaints, and slander, huh?”
“Wait a second! I never said that!” exclaimed Renge, as she banged on the table repeatedly in protest.

“That’s why, we have to give the people who come something to boast about,” I said, ignoring her. “Not just our new products, but a new experience as well.”
The people in the military were very proud of their powers, but that applied to them and them alone. Other people, who didn’t have the luxury to boast about their powers, needed other things to be proud of. Up until now, no such thing existed— Power was everything. But recently, things had changed as Asagao created products that anyone would be proud to own. Going by this trend, we had reason to believe that people would boast about the new product line and resort experience all described in my plan. We just had to make sure that people took pride in the new products, just like they did with the old ones. By doing so, it was easy for word to spread because people loved to brag about the things they had to those who didn’t have them.
“We want to give the people who couldn’t attend a sense of, ‘damn, I wish I went!’ after hearing about it from the people who did go. To create that, we should limit the number of invitees,” I continued. There wouldn’t be any sense of exclusivity if everyone went. Doing it this way would also mean that there wouldn’t be any negativity directed at us. Instead, there would just be more demand.
However, it was imperative that we didn’t let down our guard. We had to maintain our superiority in this new space since people loved to rank things. In fact, it was more important not drop down in rank than it was to rise up. It’s a nice feeling to look down see all those below, but it’s an even worse feeling being humiliated as others rose up above you.
It seemed everyone had this sort of mentality. If people had a rough time, they expected others to have a rough time as well. Similarly, people simply getting things they didn’t have wasn’t good enough. They also didn’t want other people to have it as well.
“We’ll start off by purposely making the people who didn’t go jealous of the people who did,” I said. “If we do that successfully, rumors, especially the bad ones, will start to spread about the invitees. Rumors spread the fastest, and soon everyone will have heard of us one way or another.”
I finally finished my long-winded explanation. As I did, the three just stood silently. Asagao in particular looked a bit drawn back, and soon Renge raised her hand.
“Umm… If bad rumors start to spread, wouldn’t it negatively affect our branch too?” she asked. “We are in charge of everything.”
“It could. But in that case, we’ll just have to shift the blame to the military branch. They aren’t exactly the nicest of people, and everyone knows what they’re like, right? So, we just give that notion a little push, and soon everyone will think that way.”
People loved to jump to conclusions. They loved to take things that didn’t relate to one another and somehow connect them in improbable ways. To do so, they would pretend to know everything and start spouting some

ridiculous nonsense. This nonsense included anything that was convenient for them, and most of the time, this included some pretty slanderous things. We just had to use that slander to our advantage.
“We should make a plan for that just in case. If we could somehow put the military in a bad light, then banding together and getting the majority would be a lot easier.”
With that sentence, my explanation was complete. Hopefully that was everything that Asagao wanted.
She looked a bit fed up. “Hmm… how do I put this… It’s kind of hard to say, but you’re a terrible person…”
“It didn’t seem that hard to say…” my voice slowly turned into a whisper. But, even if she did say such a thing, it seemed she understood my reasoning well.
“But a plan, huh? I got something perfect for it,” whispered Asagao.
Something perfect for it? What was it? Before I could ask such a thing, Asagao turned to Urushibara.
“Very well,” she said. “Let’s go with his plan. Urushibara, contact the engineering branch. Tell them this, and you guys can handle the actual construction part.”
“Got it, leave it to me! I already got their numbers after making them laugh through the you-know-what,” he said as he tapped his forehead.
Looking at his forehead made me think. I’ve heard that some people could only laugh when they were frightened, so I wondered when Urushibara did the *blood and ashes* and bled, did he have no choice but to laugh then? It was scary just to think about it. At that point, he might as well be threatened.
“Kasumi, you create the list of invitees,” said Asagao. “I’ll give you the data so just select the people. Also get Asuha too, please.”
“S-Sure. Well, we’re gonna have to contact Natsume anyway. When that happens, Asuha will naturally come.”
This was an event to show them what the manufacturing branch was capable of. As such, we absolutely had to invite Natsume, the current subhead, to it. Once Natsume came, Asuha would most definitely be tagging alongside her.
Asagao cleared her throat and glanced at me. “It’s important we have formal invitations for *everyone*, right?”
“I guess so,” I said. In this world, there were a lot of people who valued formality, especially those in the military branch. Since they loved their rank system, it was important that they greeted those above them with respect.
Asagao then turned to Renge. “Renge, you as well. If you have friends in the engineering branch or the trade branch, let them know of this and try to get them on board.”
“Got it!” said Renge. “But wouldn’t it be faster to just contact the head of the engineering branch?”

“Of course, I do plan to do that. But, there’s an order to everything. We may be able to convince the head, but if we don’t convince all the people ourselves, everything will be for naught. It isn’t easy for them to adopt plans made by other branches…”
“Ah, I see… I think?” Renge showed her confusion. She was a bit air-headed, so it was hard for her to understand anything remotely complicated.
“Well, you see, I’m pretty much broken inside, so I’m used to taking orders from above and just accepting it,” I explained. “However, it could be different for other branches. If they suddenly took a bunch of orders from their superiors, especially orders that kinda came from us, they may not take kindly to it.”
“Don’t call yourself broken…” said Asagao as she glared at me. I really thought I was, though…
“The real driving force behind this plan won’t be the leaders, but the people themselves. That’s why they should be happy with the plan. It’s more effective that way.”
“Oh!! I see now,” said Renge, as she clapped her hands, “if the people themselves are down to do it, rather than just following orders, then they’ll be more invested into it!”
Asagao nodded happily. She raised her fist, and her forehead once again shined in the light. “Exactly, exactly!” she shouted. “That’s why we need to do our best to get all of their support!”
And just like that, my “Ryuuguujyou Fruit Spa Collection” plan began to materialize.

Time quickly flew by as we all progressed with the plan. I myself finished up the invitee list while continuing my usual work routine. Asagao worked hard to push out the new product line, and Renge tried to spread the word to her many friends.
Urushibara worked at the actual site located in Kisarazu. Every day I would see him wear a thin towel around his head, no-rim glasses, and baggy pants as he headed towards the construction site. He happily went there with a coffee and a snack, and when he was done, he would head directly back to our office. His pants would always be dirtied with paint or cement when he got back, and with each day, he seemed to belong more and more with the engineering branch instead of with us. I guess Urushibara did seem to fit in wherever he went— the military, manufacturing, and now even the engineering branch. Perhaps that was his <World>… I wouldn’t doubt it.
However, as the day of the event drew near, that changed as Urushibara started coming to work in his uniform. Ah, now that was the Urushibara I knew.
“Asagao,” he said one morning. “It is finished!”
Asagao patted her chest a few times as she breathed out. “So looks like we’ve made it in time, huh? Good work, Urushibara!”

“Thanks!” He bowed deeply. His eyes seemed to sparkle a bit, but that was probably due to the reflection on his glasses.
“Kasumi, Renge. Get ready,” said Asagao as she put on her jacket. She walked out of the office, and we quickly followed her out.
We all squeezed into the company car once again and drove back to Kisarazu. Of course, this was the same place as the meeting we had with the military a while ago, but unlike last time, there was one more building on site. As we drove closer to it, Renge and Asagao just stared at it in awe. It was Ryuuguujyou, as we named it. It looked a bit like an imperial palace since it stood so dignified out in the open, with plenty of palm trees packed in the spaces around it. The most eye-catching thing, however, was the huge poolside in it. It faced Tokyo bay, and the view was so good that even Mt. Fuji was visible. In the pool itself, the water sparkled under the sun, and the whole scene looked like something straight out of a dream.
Urushibara finally parked the car, and we all headed toward the site. The water fountains seemed to dance in the light as if they were welcoming us.
“So, what’d you think, Chigusa?” said Urushibara triumphantly after giving us some time to look around. “Pretty similar to the renders, right?”
I didn’t reply as we both walked onto the poolside. As we did, I could see some people putting the finishing touches around the area. They were fixing the lighting, water pressure, and other things like that, so I’d imagine that they were probably people from the engineering branch. The whole thing really was just like what I had imagined, though. Honestly, I was a bit surprised— I really didn’t think the facility would be this well made.
On top of that, there were food stalls lined up on the poolside. Actually, they weren’t only selling food. There were swimming suits, flotation devices, and even kickboards for sale.
“So the trade branch even set up some shops, huh…” I whispered to myself.
Asagao heard me. “A lot of people are coming, so it’s a great business opportunity,” she blurted out as she gazed around the Ryuuguujyou Fruit Spa some more. “But wow… with this, the plan’s definitely possible!”
“We did it!” shouted Renge, happily skipping around the entire area. “We did it, Asagao!”
Urushibara was ecstatic as well. “Am I awesome or what?” he said with a hearty laugh.
With their voices, Tokyo Bay seemed to get a lot noisier. Well, it’s only expected… To be honest, I was a little proud of it myself. In fact, I felt like I even made the Chigusa family proud since I was the one who thought of this.
With this built, the Ryuuguujyou Fruit Spa became the largest resort in South Kanto. More importantly, we could move onto the final phase of the plan.
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The blue sky seemed to be the perfect backdrop for the surroundings, and the equally blue ocean water lay still. Though even with all that, the wind

felt hot… scorching hot. The gentle ocean breeze mixed with the sweet aroma of the fruits and produced a unique scent in the air. On the poolside, boys and girls were busy chattering. Their voices seemed to breathe life into the whole facility.
Soon, the fireworks lit up, and those chatters quickly turned into cheers. The spotlights focused on the stage, and a person's shadow slowly appeared. It was, of course, none other than the head of our branch, Tsurube Asagao. She walked majestically up to the microphone, almost as if she was royalty.
"Today is when we unveil our new lineup!" she shouted. "Thanks for being here to witness the unveiling of Chiba's fruit collection! We only have a little bit of time here, but please enjoy the sea and fruits to your heart's content!"
She bowed, and the spotlight beamed brightly off her forehead. In response, the crowd went wild! Their cheers and whistles echoed far off into the distance. At her signal, we brought up the fruits on stage. There were so many different types— carambolas, pitayas, passion fruits, bananas, pineapples, kiwis, papayas, and mangos were all unveiled to the crowd.
The crowd, cramped around the numerous beach chairs and parasols set up around the poolside, all stared in anticipation. The unique tropical smell would have enticed anyone, especially those who had never smelled such a flavor before.
I took a look at the crowd and quickly returned back to the staff area. From what I could see, the reception was great. The resort turned out to be a nice contrast to the gloomy and depressing world outside, and many within it enjoyed seeing the new fruits. They certainly looked like they were having a blast, and we seemed to be successful in showing them what the manufacturing branch was capable of.
Asagao got off the stage as well. She met up with me and Renge, and led us to the cordoned-off space within the poolside. This area definitely looked like the VIP area, so this was probably where most of the negotiations would be held. In this space, the heads of the engineering, trade, and supply branch were gathered under a parasol. Other representatives from all the non-military branches were present as well.
Asagao walked under the parasol and smiled at the group. "What'd you think? You guys enjoying yourselves?" she asked happily.
"Yes, of course!" cheerfully replied one of the leaders.
Asagao quickly breathed a sigh of relief and sat down among them, beginning some small talk. She was humble to their compliments, and after a while, she started to move into the serious talks.
"I'm sure you've already heard from Renge," she said. "So, what'd you think about it?"
The leaders quickly turned silent and their faces turned blue. They mumbled some incomprehensible gibberish that I couldn't seem to

understand. What a change in attitude, though… Even though they were so talkative earlier, they now had trouble speaking.
Well, their reactions were expected, I guess. It didn't take a genius to know that Asagao was referring to her candidacy for the election. This was the important part, after all. The product launch was only secondary to the lobbying she had to do to get their support. Luckily, Renge was able to get in contact with the engineering and trade branch, and I'm sure she had already talked to them about this. Asagao just needed them to confirm that they were on board.
"Your cooperation is essential for me to change the status quo of this city. I need help to completely change how points are distributed in this city, so we can give more points to the manufacturing, trade, supply and other branches… essentially us."
"Hmm… That seems to be some wishful thinking…" said one of the leaders. "To change this long-lasting tradition… I really do need more time to think about this."
Asagao just smiled. This was probably how the conversation went every time she tried to lobby, so she was probably used to smiling like this.
"Absolutely, it's just as you say! I look forward to your responses," she said. She turned to me. "Kasumi. Please, the wagon…"
As she said that, I glanced at the tea wagon parked off to the side. There was a silver platter on it covering some trays… What could be under those platters? In any case, I quickly pushed the wagon toward her and put the trays on the table.
Asagao smiled. "The formalities end here! If you would like, I got some good stuff you might want to try…"
Asagao nodded at me, and I uncovered the platters at once. The first thing I noticed was the many apples placed on the edges of the tray. On a closer look, there was also an unlabeled glass bottle with champagne glasses in the middle.
"Renge, please pour them a cup."
"S-Sure…" replied Renge. Her reply was unusually downbeat, but she poured the glasses one by one. As she did, the glasses started to foam up. Was this it, then? Was this the "weapon" Asagao was referring to earlier? It certainly seemed like it as I quietly stared on.
"With the new fruits I showed earlier and a little twist," said Asagao, smiling, as she urged them on. "I have created these unique drinks. Please, have a taste."
The leaders curiously reached for a glass. The foam seemed to give off a cool and refreshing vibe accompanied by a sweet, very sweet fragrance. On top of that, there was something else added into the mix… It was the smell of alcohol.
The leaders took a sip, and instantly they shouted in surprise. "T-This… This is!"

“Shh!!!” hushed Asagao as she raised a finger up to her mouth. She gave a sly wink. “This product, and my candidacy… they’re secrets, okay?”
“Ahahaha,” laughed one of the members after finishing up the cup. “Got it, got it.”
“Up for some more?” asked Asagao, giving a signal to Renge. In response, Renge brought out the bottle and motioned it to them.
“Of course, thanks!” they said in unison and waved their glasses around. Their faces started to turn red, and their attitudes once again did a 180 as they giggled uncontrollably like little schoolgirls.
Asagao took a look at them and smiled in satisfaction. “When the time to celebrate comes again, let’s all drink together once more~,” she said.
She finished her cup, stood up, and walked out. Renge and I followed her, and after we were a ways out, she did a small fist-bump. I didn’t think that was enough to persuade them to our side, but by constantly giving them a taste of our luxury products, they would be more and more inclined to join us over time. The experience of this great new resort would surely be carved into their memories, turning into something they would never forget. What we did was just the beginning, and I’m sure Asagao understood that. Her fist-bump really showed it all.
This city barely had anything that could provide pleasure and excitement to its inhabitants. Eventually, with this experience in their minds, they’d start to crave her luxury items more and more. As a result, I could safely say that Asagao’s influence had begun to expand to new areas.
“At this rate, she might really be the head,” I thought to myself. Somehow, looking at her now made me respect her a bit more.
But, Renge did not look happy. Her head was a bit down as she walked alongside us. “Umm… wasn’t that alcohol?” she asked solemnly.
Asagao responded immediately. “It’s juice made from fruits. So it was fruit juice!”
“Yes, indeed, fruit juice,” I piped in.
“Huh? Fruit juice?” said Renge. “But… the higher-ups had severely limited the production and distribution of alcohol, right…?”
“That’s right. They really crack down hard on the production side especially,” said Asagao nonchalantly.
Renge forced a smile. “Then I guess… you did make that in secret, huh?”
“No, we just *found* it this way,” said Asagao.
I chimed in once again. “Literally discovered from Kisarazu, you know?”
“Found it… Discovered…” repeated Renge mindlessly. She finally snapped back to reality and looked suspiciously at Asagao.
Asagao cleared her throat. “I just happened to do some things with the fruits and let it naturally ferment, and the resulting mix just happened to come close to alcohol. It’s not like we were *trying* to make it. And plus, the consumers decide what to do with this product. What they do with it is none of our concern. Okay?”

“O-Okay…” murmured Renge as she winced at Asagao’s ramblings. She nodded in defeat.
“Well then, the difficult part is over,” smiled Asagao, looking at Renge. “Let’s finally go have some fun.”
She took off to the poolside, and Renge quickly followed her. It seemed things had gone well, and finally, things were looking up. I still got more work after this, though…

The temperature kept rising as the day went on, but that didn’t stop the guests from having fun. In fact, many were playing in the pool and enjoying the baths… it was truly a sight to see.
Now, on the other hand, we from the manufacturing branch had more work to do. We didn’t even take a lunch break.
“Yo, more Cola, Chigusa,” said Urushibara. He skillfully cut up the fruits into a bunch of tiny pieces and immediately slid the pieces onto a plate. “Table 24 for this, GO! Pick up the PACE!” he added with a thunderous roar.
We put the cola and fruit plate onto the tray and hurried onto the poolside. It had been a few hours since we’ve been at it like this, and it looked like we still got a few more hours to go.
Eventually, the sun went down, and evening soon approached. Despite that, the events were by no means over. I took a look at the sun, and confirmed the time with my cellphone.
“Urushibara, it’s about time for stage two!” I shouted out.
Urushibara took off his sommelier apron and cracked his neck a few times. “Ah, is it that time already? I need to get ready,” he muttered to himself. He then went back and quickly switched to some hip-hop styled clothes. He hung some weird jewelry around his neck and turned his cap sideways.
“All set to go DJ,” he said as he grabbed a turntable. “You let Asagao know, okay?”
He stuck out his fingers in different directions as he posed to hype himself up. *YO! Check it OUT!* Once he was sufficiently pumped up, he dashed to the event booth.
Incredible… Looked like he really was going to DJ, huh? Maybe his official title would be a fruit DJ? He really could do everything, this guy… I’m sure his songs would be about as fast as the speed in which he cut his fruits. Damn, I need to stop with the compliments…
I kept gazing on until Urushibara disappeared from my sight, and then I headed towards Asagao’s tent. I said tent, but it was more like a roof that just kept out the sun. It was pretty plain, but it did provide shade, and felt very open. Honestly, it was quite a nice area to be in. Anyways, I quickly headed there to cool off, since I did work throughout the day under the blazing sun. Man, I really just wanted a break…
As I got near the tent, I began to hear a voice.
“It’s sweet! So sweet! Asagao, this is so sweet! Wooow!”

That voice… it had to be Renge's. Thanks to her voice, I was able to find Asagao's tent relatively easily. Apparently, it was third from the front.
I entered, and immediately I caught sight of a bunch of melons hanging off of a tree. There were some with light green skin that kind of looked a bit jaggedly on the outside. There were also some that had light orange skin, but unlike the other kind, their skin looked very smooth to the touch. However, both kinds were very round and plump, and the fruits themselves looked very soft. I was so intrigued by the fruits that I just stood there for a few moments.
"Kasumi! Good work!" I heard, and instantly I snapped back to reality. I looked in front and saw Renge carrying around some melons.
She was in a bikini, so her pale skin could be seen very clearly. The top part of her bikini was decorated with lovely ruffles, and the bottom was wrapped around with even cuter ribbons.
I became mesmerized just looking at her— I couldn't help but stare. She noticed me staring at her, however, and embarrassingly tried to cover up her breasts with the melons she was holding. I don't think that works, Renge…
"Kasumi, what you up to? You ditching?" snapped Asagao. She was besides Renge, and they were both separating the melons by quality. She was in her swim suit, like Renge… something she must have changed into after the meeting earlier. Her swimsuit had a light-blue strap that looped up around her neck. Her look in general somehow reminded me of a budding flower, and the sweat on her skin was like the morning condensation on that flower. It was a very modest outfit, but she was undoubtedly beautiful in it. Her smooth skin complimented her smooth forehead well, and both shined brightly under the light.
Sitting with her legs crossed, she peeked at me uncomfortably as I continued to look at her. "… Stop staring at me… idiot…" she said, disgusted. She then took a watermelon slice and gulped it down. Perhaps she too wanted to cover up her body a bit with the fruit…
"Nah, I'm on break," I said. "But the party's about to start…"
"Wow, already?"
She said that just as some clamoring could be heard outside. I instinctively turned around and was instantly blinded by someone's blonde hair. I had to continue squinting as the hair kept reflecting the sunlight directly into my eyes. Looking at the person closely, I could tell it was none other than the subhead herself, Natsume Megu. She walked up to us quickly and without hesitation, almost as if she was the queen of the poolside.
Her toned body was emphasized even more by the black tankini she was wearing. So much, in fact, that it drew the attention of all the people by the poolside. With that, alongside her long legs and mesmerizing thighs, her allure grew more and more with each step she took.
"Natsume! How's it going!" shouted Renge.

“Pretty good, pretty good. I’m just stopping by, saying hi… since you did invite me to this,” said Natsume with a smile, turning to Asagao. “Yo, Asagao, this is pretty awesome! Even my peeps are so impressed! They’ve never seen such a thing before.”
“Hehehe, that’s what I thought. You can’t find this even in Tokyo or Kanagawa! Only Chiba! Only in Chiba can you find this!” Asagao turned to me. “Kasumi, get Natsume a beach chair, please.”
Perhaps pleased with the fact that Natsume had complimented her, Asagao puffed her chest out triumphantly. Don’t let your guard down, Asagao… You too, Renge…
Renge cheerfully made a drink for Natsume while I took out a spare beach chair and placed it next to her. She promptly lied down on it and stretched out her arms and legs. Honestly, it was… pleasant to look at, but I knew it’d be bad if she caught me staring at her like this. I had already been caught earlier…
“Thanks, Kasumi,” she said, giving me a slight smile. “Can you get one more for me?”
“Sure,” I said as I reached for the spare beach chair.
“One more? For whom?” I thought, just as Asuha appeared in front of me. She wore a two piece swimsuit as well, and both the top and bottom were decorated with ruffles. The whole outfit worked well with her slim belly, and her reddish-brown hair looked beautiful against her pure, white skin. There was no denying it— she looked beautiful.
Asuha seemed very curious about the fruits as she kept looking around them restlessly. Every so often, she would go “wow…” and be amazed. It’d been a while since I’ve seen her act this way, so I was actually kind of happy. This was one of the few moments when she acted her age, after all.
I handed the beach chair to her. “Here.”
“O-Oh… thanks,” she said as she set it up and sat down.
“If you would like any, feel free to take it,” said Renge as she offered up some melons and watermelons.
“Thanks…” she whispered hesitantly. She popped only the watermelon slices into her mouth and laid face down onto the beach chair. She must had been at the age when people hated melons, seeing as she didn’t take any…
With that done, the girls quietly chilled around on the beach chairs.
Seconds turned to minutes, and minutes soon turned to hours. Before long, it was nighttime, and cold breezes started to blow by the poolside.
However, the area was by no means quieting down. Chatting voices could be heard far off into the distance, and even the leaves on the palm trees were brought to life by the wind as they rustled incessantly. The seagulls cried out in the open sky above, and the waves crashed relentlessly against the shore below. Everything sounded so natural… The more I focused on the sounds, the more they just seemed to fade away.
But suddenly, a loud roar violently shook the land. Rhythmic bass sounds came after, so low that I could feel my heart shaking. I didn’t know when I

had heard them before, but these beats sounded vaguely familiar to me. I looked towards the noises and saw that a light show had started, and soon everyone gathered around and began to dance.
YO!! Are you READY?!?! Needles are about to be dropped on some disks and foreheads! Got it?? Today is TEN needles, so look forward to that!! Okay?!? Hit it, everyone, let's dance!! HERE WE GO!!
I could tell immediately that the voice belonged to the Fruit DJ himself, Urushibara. He sure was in high spirits… Some music started to flow as he did some quick stabs with the disc. Natsume and Asuha had completely blank faces as they stared at the scene, and even I was a little speechless myself.
Asagao got up from the beach chair and turned to Renge. "It's started, huh? Let's go, Renge."
"Okay! Natsume, if you ever feel like it, come! Right now it's kind of like a rave party, you know? Something like that…"
"Oh?" said Natsume as she got up and headed to party. Renge cheerfully hummed as she quickly made another drink and chased after her. Asuha was ready to go as well— she too got up from the beach chair.
"I'm gonna go too," she said.
Asagao stopped her. "You wait right here," she said, going back to her beach chair.
"Huh? Yo, Asagao did you want anything?"
"I'm your senior, you know… can you say things more respectfully? Maybe add the senpai?"
"Alright, Forehead-senpai, what do you want?"
"F-Forehead? …" Asagao paused. "Fine, just call me Asagao! Screw it!"
It seemed Asagao decided that anything was better than being called a forehead. Sorry about my sister once again, Asagao. This wasn't a choice people should have to make.
Asuha looked annoyed. "Why do I have to be here? Just when I thought it looked interesting…"
"I needed to talk to you without Natsume here," replied Asagao. Her demeanor changed drastically, and her face turned so serious that it was almost frightening. She looked at Asuha straight in the eyes and continued.
"About the elections… I need to make it known that you, one of the candidates for the next subhead, are with me, starting from right now…"
"Huh? What?" Asuha stared back blankly. "Umm, Asagao… What are you talking about?"
I had a blank stare as well. What was she on about?
Asagao took a deep breath. "Asuha, I'm planning to join the election for the next head," she started to explain. "That's why I want your help. But at this rate, Natsume is going to be the next head for sure. If you are with me, the military branch can be divided amongst itself, giving me a better chance to win."

Asuha was a bit speechless, but she managed to squeeze out some words, “Ummm…. Saying that all of a sudden… Uhh….” She looked bewildered and uncertain, something even I didn’t see very often. She started nervously playing with her own hair and was unable to speak any more.
Asagao took one look at her and turned to me. “Kasumi, help me out here. Say something…”
“Sorry, Asagao, but I can’t help you here. She certainly won’t listen to me, and I can’t convince her to do anything.”
“Yup, yup,” nodded Asuha. She looked at me, and I looked back at her. We stared at each other for a few moments and then just smiled solemnly together.
But, Asagao did not crack a smile. She rubbed her fingers against her chin, deep in thought.
Finally, she spoke. “Well, the other day, during the battle… Asuha… you took Kasumi’s opinion over Natsume’s orders, right? Even though Natsume’s orders were supposed to be absolute?”
Ah, so that’s what it was about. During that battle, it really did look like Asuha was doing things based on what I said. So, I could see why she would think that, but that was *completely* wrong.
“Kasumi is also helping me out with this,” she continued, gripping Asuha’s hand passionately, her eyes filled with determination. “Please, Asuha. I need your help. You could be the next head one day, but I’m going to make this world better right now…”
I see, so that’s what you wanted all along. If it was leaked that Asuha, the military’s ace to-be and one of the candidates for future heads, was in secret talks with Asagao, then people might start to doubt Natsume. Even if Asuha didn’t confirm such rumors, it would breed suspicion and doubt within the military branch. Of course, even if Asuha did agree to help, there was no need for her to go that far.
Asuha looked troubled, and she just sighed deeply. “Sorry, Asagao,” she said as she freed her hand from Asagao’s. “It seems I really don’t have any interest in heads and elections and stuff like that.”
“*It seems*, huh?” Asagao was at a loss for words, and the atmosphere quickly turned silent. However, a very low noise could suddenly be heard from far away. It started soft, but gradually grew louder and louder.
“Kasumi!!!! Drinks! DRINKS!!”
Renge was running full speed at us. She looked very flustered as she tried to get our attention.
“Also, do you have any tissues or anything? I spilled the juice!” she continued shouting. Her head was dripping wet… How did you even manage to do that? Did she spill the drink like last time?
“Renge… you really are so…” smiled Asagao, who was dumfounded just by looking at her. But her face quickly tensed up as she looked further out a bit.
“N-Natsume…” she said grimly.

Surprised, I turned to look as well. In turn, Natsume did a quick smile and shrugged her shoulders.
“Asagao. Sorry about that, I couldn’t help but listen in on your conversation.”
Renge jumped back. “Natsume?!?? W-What are you doing here??”
“Well, Renge you suddenly just disappeared, and Asuha didn’t look like she was coming too…” said Natsume. She spoke lightheartedly, but her smile disappeared as she turned to Asagao. Her voice deepened, and her eyes narrowed. “… Asagao, what you just said… You serious about that?”
I knew this look well— it was the look she showed in front of the punks in the military. It was the look she had in combat, a look where even her eyes showed a killing intent.
Asagao stared back, but her lips were trembling. “I’m s-serious! I-I’m going to become the next head!”
“Don’t fuck with me. Nobody’s going to listen to you,” said Natsume in a calm, almost whisper-like, voice. Despite that, her powerful words rang deep within our hearts.
She paused, but soon continued her rant. “You still don’t get it? We are always fighting, you know. This *world* has always been fighting. That’s why the strong will always be on the top. So, someone like you… who’s not even part of the military, will *never* get recognized as a leader. Even if you ever somehow manage to be the leader, you’ll be crushed by our brute strength alone. I doubt you’ll last long.”
“But… I-If… If I stop the supplies…”
“Even if they starve, they’ll just fight back stronger. You think you can go against that? I know I can. That’s why I can and will protect everyone. The military branch isn’t just for show, you know.”
Asagao couldn’t help but just stay silent. She was trapped—she couldn’t even move. All she managed to do was to just bite her lip in frustration, a frustration certainly shared by many people not from the military branch. Natsume’s words, even the military’s, were absolute. No matter how much Asagao tried to distance herself from her, Natsume would not stop.
“The military branch is that kind of organization. Everyone thinks that way, so they’ll only accept someone that can carry their spirit and lead them. But you… you aren’t that. With you, you’ll get no one to follow you.”
In the minds of the city residents, the military branch brought about overwhelming power and immeasurable results. They were accustomed to the fact that all the previous heads had been from the military, so the thought of going against Natsume would have never crossed their minds. Asagao was probably the only one in the entire city who didn’t think this way.
“If you still are serious,” Natsume continued, glaring at Asagao, “then I have no choice but to go all out too. The moment you take this lightly… you’re done. I’m going to crush you.”

Natsume finished speaking and continued to glare at Asagao. They looked like they were sworn enemies who were destined to kill each other for eternity. Asagao, still at a loss for words, simply nodded. That went unacknowledged as Natsume turned to Asuha at the same time.
“I’m going, Asuha,” she said with a quick shout.
Asuha glanced at me worryingly.
“It’s fine, Asuha,” I said reassuringly. “I think you should go… I’m okay here.”
“O-Okay…” whispered Asuha as she prepared to follow Natsume out. She noisily put on her flip-flops in the sand.
Hearing this, Asagao desperately looked at me. “P-Please… Kasumi. You also do something about Asuha…”
“Sorry, I really can’t… I’m not going to hold her back. I want her to do what she wants…”
I thought saying that was a little harsh, but that was one thing I strongly believed in.
Asuha kicked the sand a little and turned back to Asagao. “You know… it’s not that I hate you… but seeing you do that kind of thing pisses me off a little bit.”
“That kind of thing?”
“The way you use people like that. We aren’t your pawns, so please don’t think of us that way,” said Asuha. Her voice sounded bored as always, and she looked sleepy. But as she left, she stomped the ground angrily, more so than usual.
“O-Oh…” Asagao looked down at the ground depressingly. She wiped her forehead and took a deep breath. “Sorry… I didn’t consider your feelings at all…”
“No, no. I’m sorry I couldn’t back you up like you hoped. That makes us even, right?” I said reassuringly. I tried to be as cheerful as ever, but Asagao wouldn’t even look up at me.
She looked like she wanted to say something, but she only took a deep breath. Her shoulders trembled as she tried to hold everything in.
“I’m sorry, Asagao,” said Renge as she gently touched Asagao’s trembling shoulders. “I messed up, and it’s all my fault…”
“It’s okay. This was bound to happen sooner or later. Maybe if we had some more time… but what’s done is done. Don’t worry too much about it, Renge.”
Asagao grabbed Renge’s hand and slowly raised her head. As she did, I could see her moist eyes and shaky lips as she forced out an awkward smile.
“I’m going to go back first and think about how to handle this,” she continued. “You two can leave today too, and just let Urushibara handle the rest of the night. Tomorrow, once everything’s cleaned up, come back, okay?”
She slowly walked out of the tent, but stopped just as she passed me.
I’m sorry… I’m really sorry, Kasumi.

Chapter 6: Doudemo ii Sekai Nante

Urushibara finished up the events just as the day wrapped up. Once he finished, we cleaned up, and then took his car back to Chiba. The sun was just about set, but its faint glow illuminated the ocean red.

We were completely silent in the car— Renge didn't even hum at all. It wasn't that the events went poorly… it was just what happened after. Urushibara stayed especially quiet. Ever since Renge told him what happened, he hadn't been talking much. Surely he was worried about Asagao.

Of course, Renge and I were just as worried for her. We did nothing but stare at the everlasting debris out the window. Some things never change, it seemed…

At last, after driving for some time along the coast, we finally arrived back at Chiba. Urushibara slowed down as he drove in, until he finally parked on a small hill near our office.

"… I'm gonna return this car real quick," he said as he motioned us to get off.

He left the moment we stepped out of the car, and I waited until he was well out of sight to start walking. My hair felt kind of messy, but luckily the wind seemed to straighten it out a bit.

Seagulls began to cry out from far away. I stopped, and once again just simply listened to them. The more I listened, the more it seemed like their cries were being orchestrated together. They seemed to just blend in so seamlessly with each other.

Suddenly, I heard footsteps behind me, interrupting the flow.

"What's going to happen from now on?"

"I don't know…" I answered. I didn't need to turn around to know who it was. After all, there was only one other person who was with me.

"I can't imagine what'd happen if Natsume really went all out… or what Asagao is thinking right now…" she said, taking a quick step onto the grass and jumping onto some rubble. "If only the two could work together instead of fighting like this…"

She suddenly turned to me as she balanced herself on the rubble. Her skirt fluttered in the wind, and that just made her all the more beautiful to look at. She looked so beautiful here, in fact, that I felt she looked a bit out of place with all the rubble around her. In any case, for someone as clumsy as she was, she sure did have a good sense of balance.

"Asagao is so amazing, you know? She's smart… cute… and she always has a lot on her mind. I truly believed she could be the city head," Renge said passionately, but with a hint of sadness.

I didn't say a word, but instead, just nodded.

“Natsume is also so amazing. She’s beautiful… strong… and has… hmm, what do you call it? Passion, I guess? Maybe pride? Anyways, she has something like that, and that’s why everyone follows her so loyally, I think.”
Renge spoke with such admiration that it reminded me of something that was said to me a while back: *Girls don’t just simply compliment other girls… they usually have something else in mind.*
“On the other hand, I’m completely useless…” she added with a bitter smile.
But, that bitter smile began to turn into a smirk once I took a look at her. Her long, black hair swayed with the wind as it reflected the sunset glow. Honestly, with it swaying so much like that, it kind of reminded me of a demon spreading its wings…
I took a look back at the sky. It was red… almost too red. The sunset itself was beautiful to the point of disgust, and its allure almost seemed frightening. This sky left a slight crimson afterglow on Renge’s face, but that contrasted with her hair as it seemed to get darker and darker the longer I stared. She took the sun from the front, but the darkness crept up from the back. She always did stand in the middle of these two extremes…
“I was told I was sooo useless in the military. I for sure wasn’t needed there, but other places wouldn’t take me in because I was from the military… I truly can’t do anything, heh…”
I’ve said it so many times before, and I’ll say it again. Renge and I were clearly different from anyone in this city. We were a disgrace… We suffered the humiliation of not being able to find our place in this society.
“But, it’s because I… No, it’s because *we* are like that… that we can do things others can’t. It’s because of the very fact that we got kicked from the military that we are able to understand both Natsume and Asagao’s way of doing things. I truly believe that these are the things only we can do, not as members from the manufacturing or military branch, but as people who weren’t needed in this city.”
Renge said that and gently smiled at me. Yes, our circumstances were certainly similar. However, no matter how similar our journeys had been up to this point, our paths would probably diverge in the future. We were just different people with different fates.
I scratched my ruffled hair a little bit and looked away from her. “So essentially,” I said, “what you really want to say is that as people who had been part of the military, you want us to follow in Asagao’s footsteps?”
Renge was surprised to hear that. She blinked a few times, but then did a slight grin.
“So you could tell…” she said. “Kasumi, you really are amazing…”
“I’m really not that amazing. Anyone could have guessed that listening to you talk about her.”
In response, Renge jumped off the rubble and stood in front of me. “You’re right, I would have guessed the same. But you know, Kasumi? Don’t you think that’s something only we can do? We were once the military members Nastume was talking about. Because of that, we can pick up the things

Asagao can’t do and do it for her. Once we do that, everyone can live with their chests held high.”
I carefully and silently listened to her words. After a bit of silence, I glanced at her once again, and asked her if that was all. As I did, she became a bit teary-eyed and looked up at me.
“Come change the world with me…” she said softly, holding out her hand. Once again I couldn’t help but notice her slim fingers, her delicate wrist, and her smooth skin. Once again I hesitated to reach out, and once again I was late to shake her hand. Though, I think this time it was okay.
“Sorry, I’m going to have to pass on that,” I said as I withdrew my hand. Despite feeling that this would be the last opportunity to ever shake her hand, I didn’t do it.
“You know… To be honest, I’m fine with anyone being the head. Natsume, Asagao, and even you would be fine by me. To me, that’s really not that important. What is important for me is just doing my work and living a peaceful and stable life. That’s why I can’t…”
I sure said a lot, but that didn’t mean I meant any of it. It was just a whole lot of nonsense that came out of my mouth. She said she wanted to change the world with me, but unfortunately, whether it be changing the world, saving it, or even destroying it, I really had no interest in those things.
I’m sure that if she had worded it differently, I would have answered differently as well. If she had said what she *really* wanted to say, preferably with the tears and emotions that came with it, I would have gone with her. If she had told me her *real* wish, thinking only about herself and not anyone else, I would have happily followed in her footsteps. No matter how despicable, repulsive, and shameful that wish may have been, as long as it was something she had truly wanted from the bottom of her heart, I would have definitely helped her with it.
… But unfortunately, that didn’t happen. That’s why I only had one more thing to say.
Doudemoii Sekai Nante.
(I really don’t care about this world).
[End Volume 1]

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